

Barney Stories - Consolidated

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Summary: In response to requests, I consolidated the stories into one document with some additional text to make it more "booklike". Far from done, but will be easier reading if you want the Barney stories in order and all together.**All characters, places and references to the published work The Blue Castle belong to the heirs of L.M. Montgomery. No copyright infringement intended. This is

Barney Stories - Consolidated

Barney Snaith, criminal, reprobate, island-owner, and millionaire's son, climbed underneath the most unreliable car in the Muskoka to clean off the spark plugs again. In his wet, dirty overalls sliding around on the ground, he seemed more suspicious than even when he drove around with no hat, smoking his villainous pipe, and not caring one whit what anyone said, thought or wondered about him.

On this particular breakdown, he was outside Lover's Lane. He saw Ross Mitchell with Carrie Donegal. He knew just about everyone in Deerwood and 'up back' in the rougher, wilderness homesteads deeper into the woods, although no one in the least suspected that he did. The only families he didn't truly know where the insular ones like the Palmers, the Montroses, and the Stirlings. And he didn't want to. Bunch of stuffy, self-important fools.

Barney concluded that the mouse seeming to be fleeing out of Lover's Lane and pretending not to look at him must be one of that crowd. He barely looked at her, but noticed her completely sensible shoes and amazingly old-fashioned dress.

Without realizing that all his future hope, love and joy had just passed him by, Barney turned his attention back to his old gray Slosson, nickname Lady Jane - after the famous murdered Lady Jane Grey who also had a rotten family just like he did. Well, maybe a patent medicine seller wasn't quite so bad as the Tudors - but pretty near.

And she started. Without a backwards glance at the mouse, Barney started whistling as he drove off.

Before heading home, Barney stopped in at Abel's. Cissy met him quietly and ate one of the oranges that he brought her. He talked to her for a short time. She kept absent-mindedly asking him to overlook the dust and mess. He reminded her for the several dozenth time that he was always a mess - and mess didn't bother him. She talked about her baby for a little while, answered all his questions about the doctor's visit which continued to be more bad news, and gratefully accepted the boiled eggs and bacon that he made for her. She fell asleep on the couch as he read her a history of Ireland that she enjoyed.

"I hate doing this." Barney slowly walked back to his car and looked up at the house. "She should never have been left alone here. What is her family thinking? Abe's a mule. He won't listen to me. He knows she needs help and claims no one will come. Afraid of catching it. Six months. I don't think it will be that long." As he kept talking to no one, Barney drove down the winding road to the bank of the lake. His canoe was waiting.

After parking Lady Jane, Barney hopped into his canoe with his mail, supplies and a pensive expression. He rowed over to his retreat, his island. A pier. A small shack. A lean-to. An outhouse. And lots of pine trees, birds and the most beautiful views in the world.

After making a fire, Barney sat going through his mail. He sighed as he opened the latest letter from his attorney.

"Dear Mr. Snaith:

It has come to my attention that your recent manuscript is now two weeks overdue from our contract terms with Voss & Conway. However, they have graciously given you an extension of four weeks.

I recommended fulfilling the contract and delivering your manuscript in person as per your usual practice to ensure no further delays.

Yours respectfully, etc."

Barney crumpled up the letter in a fist and threw it in the fire. Yes, he was late. He knew he was late. He didn't need hounding letters telling him that he was late. It wasn't working. Something wasn't working. The theme wasn't there. It was disjointed. The writing was good, but the theme.

Barney sat up with a sudden thought. The mouse walking out of Lover's Lane. She had come walking as the sun was setting. He'd arrived at Abel's by moonlight. Almost all his stuff was from his night ramblings. What wasn't he could take out.

Jumping up, he grabbed a notebook, pencils and a sketchpad before running down to his pier. A huge moon rose over the water illuminating the lake with dancing moonlight. Quick jerky strokes captured it on his pad. A flip to a blank page started, "As the sun slides off into her resplendent slumber, another wonder rises. Quieter. Softer. Mysterious. In whose rays, all the secrets of the woods are revealed in shadowâ€|. "

Chapter 2

A neat pile of galley proofs sat on Barney's desk. He smiled as he dropped the last page on top - By Moonlight by John Foster. The best book ever. Some of the writing actually seemed to sing off the page. It could be better, but he was already late. No one would complain about this. It was worth waiting for.

Barney tapped his stack of papers into a neat bundle, dropped them into his bag, and checked his luggage one more time. He had everything he needed for a trip to his publishers. No, no. He'd forgotten another set of Barney clothes. Just in case something happened to these. Oh, and he had to cut his hair a little bit. This was too wild.

By 9:00am the next morning, he was steaming to Montreal.

Over dinner, John handed over his manuscript and apologized for the delay. Eric Voss couldn't wait. He took it immediately and stopped. "What's this?"

"My manuscript."

"We discussed your doing a series on small mammals. How exactly does 'moonlight' fit in?"

"I couldn't. It wasn't working. It's good. You won't care. Read it."

Looking as though he did not agree, Mr. Voss sighed irritated and read the first three pages. By page four, he was all smiles with a face that radiated as though someone had told him that his stocks were up 67% in one day. Only two chapters in, he pushed it over to his partner who wasn't so easily pleased - but this time agreed without hesitation that it was a masterpiece.

Mr. Dewyer, John Foster's attorney, wisely said nothing but slid John a note, "Ask for another advance. They'll do anything you want right now."

John laughed and handed it to Eric Voss. He pulled out his company checkbook. "Name your price, Foster. Be reasonable. How much do you want?"

After meeting with the printer, his publishers and editors, and nearly running into Deathering, John Foster hopped back onto his Ontario-bound train for home. Nothing seemed so beautiful as Port Lawrence when he finally arrived back. He deposited his check, found that strangely no one had wanted to steal his car from the garage he rented while he was gone, and dropped down onto his bed in relief. He relaxed back into his usual self of Barney Snaith.

Chapter 3

The next two months passed as they usually did. Cissy continued to decline. Abel continued to be impossible. Four times in the past several months, he'd had to go retrieve him from somewhere as he was so drunk he couldn't find his way home. Else, he had to go dump him off at one of his shady friends' houses to get him away from Cissy

who needed peace and quiet.

Word had come from his attorney again. The book was out in a week, lots of praise probably half sincere, and his bill.

The advance copies came. Barney nearly tossed them straight in the fire, except he hadn't made one. What kind of a stupid cover was this? He wasn't a novelist. He was a true author, not some ridiculous woman who wrote love stories because she didn't have anything better to do. This looked like a mystery or worse a ghost story with the dark trees, no moon - and yet moonlight everywhere. Rather than destroy it, he put one away with its brothers and their ridiculous covers on his bookshelf while he piled up the rest in his lean-to. He'd donate them again to the Deerwood library when he was back in town.

The following Wednesday, Barney unexpectedly met Abel hunting in the woods. His luck had been extremely bad and only had a few rabbits he'd snared. Barney decided to get a rise out of him and began to talk about the moose he'd shot two days earlier. Abel snarled at him for not sharing the meat until laughing Barney admitted that he hadn't been hunting for two weeks. "I'm half-starved, Abe. Only eating eggs and bacon. I bet even you are eating better than that."

"Aye, t'is a wonder at me own haus. Ah've been eatin' like a king, better'n. My girl's cookin' up a storm."

"Really?"

"You've ne'r had the like."

Barney found this confusing, but much of what Abel said when he was this drunk made no sense. After a long morning's hunting, Abel had a chicken to take home. Barney had argued that you can't kill a neighbor's chicken, but Abel replied if Mark Plucker wanted his chickens, he should mend that hole in his coop. He'd found it "and Ah'm keepin' it".

As they shook hands before going back each man to his house, Abel invited Barney over for the evening with "And ye can had sum of my girl's cookin'."

"Is she able to cook?"

"Cum see for yerself."

Barney had agreed with thanks and wondered just how drunk Abel really was if he couldn't remember he'd had Cissy's cooking before. He wasn't sure if he should. Cissy was so tired these days. Maybe she wanted to do something. Was it her birthday? When had the baby died? No, that was in the fall. Maybe he should bring flowers.

Barney dropped Abel off before running into Deerwood. He went into the milliner's not sure what he should get when he saw a straw hat. Cissy liked to be out in the garden, but she always wore an old battered straw hat. It had some flowery stuff to make it look nice. He bought it and hurried home to get some work done yet today.

Around 6:30, Barney finished writing as he had lost the last bit of light.

"Well, at least tonight I'll get a real meal." he thought as he quickly washed his hands and neck, but not bothering to change his clothes spattered with mud from this morning's early rambling in search of bee hives before his hunt with Abel.

Barney parked Lady Jane and heard Abel shouting into the house, "Ye and your fussin' ways. T'is me own haus!" as he scraped his muddy boots outside the door. Abel must have heard him walk up behind him. "Aye, mind ye scrape yer boots or me lady'll be fussin' at ye."

Barney stopped walking to take this in. Abel disappeared into the house. Abel's previous words took on new meaning. Surely, he hadn't gotten married. That seemed impossible. But to think he'd bring a woman in the house with Cissy there! Who possibly would agree to live with him?

Barney began to scrape his boots wondering what sort of woman he was about to meet.

Abel voice boomed out of the house. "Did ye mav me hammer?"

Barney heard a soft voice answer as he entered the house.

"If Ah wanted it in me tool box, it'd bah thay'r."

Barney walked into the parlor to see Cissy looking very neat and pretty in painfully clean room - even the fireplace was properly cleaned out. Cissy had an actual tea service set out and was sewing some pretty thing. He looked behind him at the muddy trail he'd left despite the scraping and down at the mud on his overalls.

"Oh, Barney! Come in! You must meet Miss Stirling!"

"Miss Stirling? Fromâ€| Deerwood?" Barney asked aloud as he felt utter confusion and wondered to himself. "Why was a Stirling woman in Abel's house?"

Cissy smiled almost proudly at something behind him.

Barney turned to see a small, faded woman in an ugly, old-fashioned dress. She smiled very sweetly at him with a "Good evening, Mr. Snaith. Have you had your supper? Do you like roast chicken and mashed potatoes? Mr. Gay told me that you were coming for dinner."

"Ay! What took ye so long man! The woman would na' give me me fud witho' ye."

Feeling like he was in a very strange dream, he sat down at a respectably set dining table to one of the best meals he'd had in years. Miss Stirling kept offering him more and kept him well supplied in tea knowing how he took it without him telling her. When the chicken was picked to bones, Miss Stirling took away the plates quickly, but Abel hadn't gotten up.

"Ye enjoyed my girl's cookin', did ye?"

Before he could answer, Miss Stirling put down an apple pie that smelled wonderful. Barney regretted eating so much for dinner. She cut him a generous slice, blushed and nearly fled into the kitchen when he complimented her cooking.

When she came back with milk for Cissy, she calmly told her, "I hope it's not too hot. Please try it first."

Cissy looked up at Miss Stirling like a child would at a beloved mother. She drank the milk and announced that she was going to bed early as she hadn't slept well the night before. "Valancy, where is Mountaintops? I want to read more of it before I go to sleep."

Barney's fork clattered out of his hand onto his plate.

"It was due back at the library. I had Jacques return it today. He walked by on his way into town."

"I wanted to read about the eagles again. Oh, well. Father can get one for us when he is next in Deerwood."

Barney kept his eyes down. He felt stupidly flattered that Cissy liked his books. And he had always thought the eagle passage one of his best.

Barney realized she was going upstairs. He called after her, "Wait, I got you something."

Cissy stopped while Valancy moved towards the kitchen.

"Valancy, please! I want you to see it, too! This is so exciting. It's like my birthday!"

Barney handed her the box.

Before she even opened it, she cried out, "A hat! Oh, Barney! How kind!"

"Well, it's not that great. I thought it might be useful outside."

Cissy pulled out a charming straw hat with wide white ribbons and fake pastel flowers. "Oh, Barney! You are such a tease! 'Useful outside'! As if anyone would work in a hat like this!"

Valancy quietly took it from her and put it on her, tying up the ribbons. Cissy looked painfully young, unnaturally so as though she were a child. "You look very lovely, Cissy. Mr. Snaith, it was a truly kind and thoughtful present. All of Cissy's good hats are worn out. We can wear it during our walks. You will look very elegant, Cissy."

Miss Stirling turned to walk upstairs with Cissy. He heard her soft voice reciting, "Yet, all is not barrenness, rock and crag. All is not lichen, moss and fungi. Creatures live within the cliffs. Above which in their majesty they soar to the highest—" He lost the sound of her voice.

This odd little woman memorized his books. Barney gave his hard, cynical laugh. She certainly wasn't the typical reader according to his publisher's statistics.

"Well, Abel, she is a good choice in housekeeper. You'll grow fat on her cooking. I need a smoke. Care to join me?"

As he and Abel smoked by the fire, Miss Stirling came down, quietly opened the windows, and disappeared.

Barney felt slightly annoyed. Where was she going? His curiosity was peaked. He sat slumped with his hands in his pockets.

"Miss Stirlin'! I want ta talk ta ye!"

She walked in holding a dish towel with her hands on her hips. "Cissy is sleeping. I must ask you to stop shouting, Mr. Gay. I will be glad to talk to you when the dishes are done."

About ten minutes later, Barney and Abel had begin to argue over German Higher Criticism. Miss Stirling came in after a little while and sewed without a word for over an hour.

"And wha' do ye thank o'it, Miss Stirling?"

"Almost nothing. I confess I've never heard of what you're talking about, but it seems to me that what they are saying is that they believe that they have a new, better way of living based on a new way of thinking - better than all people before them, better than even what God gave us. That simply sounds like extreme pride. Isn't that what the French thought too? They ended up with the Revolution and Napoleon. It seems likely that Germany may end up the same. But again, I know nothing about it. I am really very ignorant."

Barney didn't move, but smiled to himself. "No, she knows nothing about it and just crushed both of our arguments in a few words. This is one strange little woman." He inwardly laughed while Abel was being reprimanded for shouting again as he had loudly objected to Miss Stirling's "fool opinions".

Barney watched as she folded up her sewing, put it away, and quietly remarked as Abel continued to roar, "You may yell at Mr. Snaith as long as he will permit it. I will no longer. Goodnight."

Abel kept after her before turning to Barney perfectly normally, "That's got rid of her. Well, what does tha' think of my girl?"

"I don't."

Abel laughed. "Aye, no man could. Such a scrawny, plain, fussy one. He'd remember her cookin' while trying to forget the figure and face."

Barney had a pang of sympathy for Miss Stirling. An unbidden memory rose up in his mind from his first year at boarding school. "Redfern, you're a stupid, scrawny pipsqueak!" before they'd launched into worse mockery and profanity at him.

This Miss Stirling seemed a kind, caring, compassionate woman, hardly worthy of being "forgotten". Barney determined he would be kind to

Miss Stirling.

Chapter 4

Over the next week, he saw Abel several times and even intentionally passed the house a few times he had to own to himself hoping for an invitation to dinner again. Usually he would just stop by, but for some reason, he felt as though he should follow the usual rules of politeness with Miss Stirling there.

Finally, he stopped by after a visit to the Port. He felt a little grumpy and irritated that he couldn't just stop over whenever he wanted to anymore. Miss Stirling was washing dishes again, but immediately stopped and made up a plate of stew for him saying, "You are in good time, Mr. Snaith. It should still be warm." before returning to washing dishes, taking his when he was done. As he walked into the parlor, she handed him a sort of cherry tart and a fork while following him in with tea.

Feeling in a much better mood, Barney peeled an orange for Cissy and listened to her talk about "Valancy" - their walks in her new hat, her reading, their going through her mother's trunk, her new dress Valancy was making out if one of her mother's old dresses that matched the new hat perfectly, the doctor's visit, and how Valancy had argued for 10 minutes about her coughing - and now she had new medicine that made her sleep much better.

Barney's opinion of "Valancy" rose. He saw her red cheeks, recognizing that she was embarrassed as Cissy kept talking. Barney gently interrupted with, "Miss Stirling, how have you been this week?"

"Happily busy, Mr. Snaith." She exchanged a smile with Cissy. "My uncle James came to visit, but that was the only true excitement."

"Oh, Valancy! You shouldn't!"

"What?"

In a matter of fact voice, Valancy explained about her uncle's trip to visit the asparagus bed courtesy of Mr. Gay's strength as he threw him out of the house. She continued sewing so placidly that Barney would not have believed her, if Cissy were not so embarrassed.

Valancy folded up her sewing while sweetly saying, "I will see Mr. Snaith out, dear. You're yawning. Please go ahead up to bed without me. I will be up to read shortly."

Barney mechanically rose, walking out to Lady Jane. After Valancy's polite, kind thanks for coming, Barney burst out with "Miss Stirling, you're a brick. You're a whole cartload of bricks." Before he had his first real conversation with her as they talked about her coming to keep house for Abel.

As he drove off, he shook his head and thought "whole cartload of bricks". No one would guess he was John Foster with remarks such as that. Why did he say such stupid things around her? He'd also told her stew was "almost as good as what he used to get from their

Chinese cook on the gold fields". She had been confused saying, "Oh, do Chinese cooks make good Canadian food? Better than Canadians?" She wasn't offended only curious, but it was still a fool thing to say.

Barney drove back home feeling almost embarrassed - and frustrated that he was.

Two weeks quickly followed as Barney devoted his time to writing. He had spent a few months fishing and hunting and doing nothing, but it hadn't really mattered. He had finished a book only three months ago. His next deadline was nine months away, but he felt energized to write. He brimmed with good ideas. His first chapter flew onto the page. He planned to write day and night to get a draft done within two months so that he could take a long break.

This plan did not go as he had anticipated. With the pen in his hand and the daylight, he accomplished a good deal, but when the twilight illuminated the waters of the lake, he felt vaguely discontented. He didn't feel like doing anything, not even reading. He went to bed earlier and earlier almost every night. Even a night ramble didn't help much. After four nights at home, he stopped in by Abel's.

Cissy was sleeping. Valancy was reading his latest book - By Moonlight. She happily put it down and welcomed him. Barney rather guiltily accepted another supper. He really couldn't pass up fried cod and chips. He hadn't had it since he'd been in London, and the smell in the house was delicious. After eating five pieces of fish and promising to replace it after his next trip into the Port, Valancy began to tell him all about Cissy as if knowing that was his reason for coming. About halfway through her short talk, Abel walked in.

"Eatin' ma o'ah haus and hom', I seh. For tha', thee mus' cum smoke."

Barney sat smoking with Abel for the next half an hour while Valancy read his book and smiled. He watched her face and could tell she truly enjoyed it. He wondered how much of it she really understood. She was such a 'housewifely' sort that it seemed sort of strange that she would enjoy the natural sciences.

Valancy broke into his thoughts by reading a passage aloud. "Isn't that marvelous? Doesn't that remind you of your youth, when you feel the whole world is before you and anything is possible? You know it will never happen, but you still have the hope that it might. That's what it makes me think." She smiled happily and returned to reading.

Barney paused smoking and looked over at her. Her words had pierced him, "'You know it will never happen, but you still have the hope that it might.' How old was she? 30? No, less than that. And she talked like that hope was something in the past. She's a young woman with no hope of the life she wants or dreams of having. So, she comes here to ease a dying girl's last days." He knew in that moment that he liked Cissy's Valancy quite a lot. She was a true lady, a good woman. He respected her even more.

Barney's next day of writing went remarkably well. He finished, walked into his parlor, and immediately thought, "Let's see. I can

sit here by myself and re-read a book or go to bed. Or I can go over to Abel to a good meal, a warm fire and interesting company. I'm off."

After making the same decision nearly every day during his two week writing spree, Barney changed it on a Friday afternoon. He decided to head into the Port. He caught the grocer at closing and bought Cissy's oranges. As he walked out, he saw a candy shop across the way. He'd often seen it, but never went in. As he left eating his liquorice, his eyes fell on a box of assorted chocolates - a square, not romantic-looking one. Barney bought it almost without thinking.

By 8, he was walking up to Abel's front door. Cissy answered it excitedly, wearing a lovely new pink dress. He admired it and walked with her into the parlor. Miss Stirling was raking out the grate while Abel moodily glared at her.

Cissy quietly explained, "Father threw a cup into the fireplace. Valancy told him to stop losing his temper around me and upsetting me. She was very angry. Father's in a bad mood."

Abel looked up at Barney, grunted and left out the back door.

As Valancy stood up, he held the door for her and followed her into the kitchen. He suddenly felt like a fool. Why had he done this?

Valancy smiled at him, "Have you eaten, Mr. Snaith? If not, you are in luck. We have cold meat, spicy mustard just how you like it, and new bread." Without waiting for an answer, she fixed him a plate as he washed his hands at the kitchen sink. Cissy passed through the kitchen saying that she was going for a short walk and would be right back.

Valancy put down his plate and tea before she sat down to keep him company while he ate. Barney finished eating as they did not say a word to each other. Barney leaned back, sighed, and smiled. "I didn't realize how hungry I was. Thank you again for another excellent meal, Miss Stirling."

"I am glad you enjoyed it."

"Miss Stirling, wait, please. Don't get up yet."

Valancy had half-risen, but sat back down. "Yes? Is there something wrong, Mr. Snaith?"

"Far from it. I bought you a present."

Barney handed over the box like it was a dead fish or a piece of firewood. Valancy graciously accepted it, obviously with no idea what it was until she removed the cover. To say that she was both astonished and pleased would not fully express her reaction. She sat still for a moment before she breathed out, "How kind, Mr. Snaith! I've never had a box of chocolates before. And I haven't tasted chocolates for several years." She radiated happiness, blushed and offered him one which he declined. She put the cover back on without eating one either. "I will eat them slowly to make them last. This was really very generous of you."

Barney felt even more foolish. It was just some candy. It wasn't a big deal. "Did this woman never get a present in her whole life?" passed through this mind. He had the sudden suspicion that was true. She'd never received nice things - ever. He was even more glad that he'd bought it. Gently, he asked if they should join Cissy outside. They found Cissy sitting on the back porch. When they joined her, she apologized, but said that she was so tired that she was going to bed. She told Valancy and Barney to not worry about her and stay as long as they wanted to. She declined Valancy's offer to read to her, saying that she just wanted to go to bed.

Barney sat talking to Valancy for the next hour before he walked with her to the gate. After they shook hands, Barney watched her go back into the house. His respect for her soared. Valancy hummed "Count Your Blessings" in time with her steps up the stairs. For the first time in a long time, he forgot about his own pain and felt true, sincere sympathy for someone.

Barney whistled all the way home. There was nothing like a visit to Abel's to raise a fellow's spirits.

Chapter 5

Barney now came to Abel's several nights a week - always after dinner, but Valancy made sure he ate well. Abel ragged him about it, but didn't say he couldn't come. His writing was progressing amazingly well. He ran errands to the Port for Valancy and always paid for it and whatever else from Deerwood that Valancy would allow him to buy in appreciation for the meals.

After Valancy had been at Abel's for several weeks, their usual evening routine was broken. He arrived wondering what he'd have for dinner, sat down in the parlor after Cissy let him, and began to talk when he suddenly heard a howl coming from Abel. "Why, Miss Stirlin', what would yer family be sayin'?"

"Probably much the same as they are now."

Valancy walked into the parlor. She was wearing the most outlandish dress.

After seeing her only in her long-sleeved, high collared dresses, Barney felt shocked. Her arms were bare almost to her shoulders when she moved. Her entire neck and part of her shoulders was showing in the low collar. And what had happened to her figure? It was a wild, crazy dress. "I've never seen something that suited someone less." Barney thought as he tried desperately not to laugh.

A grinning Abel had followed her out of the kitchen. Valancy set down his dinner for him as well as a plate of cookies, before facing Abel saying, "Let's come to an understanding, Mr. Gay. I will remain in your employment. Your eyes will remain on my face and away from my ankles."

Barney choked on his lemonade and grinned at her back as she marched back to the kitchen. Unconsciously, he looked down and noticed for the first time that her dress was a good half a foot off the floor.

"Ye ere robbin' me of one of the joys of having a young woman as a housekeeper, Miss Stirling. I'm an old dog. I'll not do ye harm."

Barney watched her with twinkling eyes when she came back with the tea service. He saw her hesitate as though she were wondering whether or not she should say it, but she did, "Very true, Mr. Gay. There is at least that consolation in being an old maid. I am no longer affected by such gallantries. You may talk all you want to, but I shall not listen."

"Ye know that ye like to hear a kindly word when ye are such a peaky little woman."

Barney felt sorry for her in that moment. What Abel said was true, but there was no need to make her hear it. There was real pain on her face, but he wanted to applaud when she triumphantly quipped, "Yet, I am the woman that you are talking about and following around flattering, Mr. Gay. What does that say of you? I must not be too bad." as she sailed back into the kitchen.

"Ye are the only woman here! I've no one else to look at. Else, no one with eyes 'ad look at YE!"

Valancy filled his glass with more lemonade that she'd brought from the kitchen. Tears swam in her eyes. This conversation was hurting her deeply. Barney decided to rescue her, but when he started to talk, she'd done the strangest thing. She sat down between the two of them on the floor, asking Cissy to hand over her darning and silently began to work.

"What are ye doin'? Are ye daft, Woman?"

"I understood that you wished to look at me. Can't you see me from here?"

"You've been trumped, Abe. Better give up." Barney felt proud of her and ready to strangle Abel.

Abel asked him about his newly found fishing hole. Barney mentioned that he'd bring some cod he'd caught next time he came as another way to repay all his breakfasts.

"Eh? Ye been eatin' all yer meals with my women? And how ar' ye catchin' cod in a lak'?"

"What?"

"What breakfasts?"

"I meant, suppers. Dinners. I mean evening meals. I don't come during the day, Abe. And I meant trout or bass, of course."

Barney looked down at Valancy calmly darning socks. Her head was immediately next to his muddy overalls. "Why didn't I change?" ran through his mind. It was humiliating to have a woman sitting at his feet to begin with, but when he was dirty and unkempt, probably smelly. He felt like such a fool.

Abel brought up politics which they discussed in spurts. "Have ye

gone Grit, man? What is the matter with ye? Do na' ye know yer own mind?"

Barney said nothing and kept smoking with his eyes traveling down to Valancy's little black head, reminding him again she was so close to his dirty clothes. Lamely, he started to talk about his writing, but realized in time and changed it to "letters".

"And who be YE writin' ta?"

"No one."

"Ye sit in you shack a'writin' to no one? Ye and Miss Stirlin' are bath daft."

Barney looked down at Valancy again in time to see her bite back a smile. "Now, she knows I'm an idiot. Why doesn't she say something?"

"Ah, Miss Stirling, I ain't the only man you got lookin' at you. Poor Barney can't seem to get his thoughts stra' nor his words o'his mouth nor his eyes awa' from ye. Ah, he looked away, but I see'd him. Fascinated by ye."

Valancy flashed red, but calmly replied, "Then, I should get extra money this month. Having a woman around to look at wasn't part of our bargain. I can always go sit in the kitchen."

"Ah, sure, but you'll disappoint Barney. He likes to see you so interested in what he's saying. Wishes ye'd talk ta 'im, he does."

"I think, Mr. Gay, you like to cause trouble and would lack opportunity if I were not present. I will protect Cissy from being your victim by staying here. Else, I will take Cissy with me into the kitchen - and you can make your own meals tomorrow."

Barney burned with anger. There was no need to embarrass her such a good, respectable woman. At least, she'd rebuffed him as a troublemaker and paid no attention.

After another hour of talking, Valancy rose to her feet announcing that she and Cissy were going to bed. Barney looked at her face to see how she was managing after all Abel's attacks tonight. She seemed strangely drawn, almost as though she were in pain. She extended her hand to him, saying rather breathlessly, "I'm sorry that I can't see you out tonight, Mr. Snaith. Do have a pleasant talk with Mr. Gay." He stood, shook her hand and looked down at her, meeting her eyes. He was struck by how green they were, almost like emeralds, the same strange fire and mystery. Valancy had blushed deep red. He realized he was standing there holding her hand, saying nothing. Gruffly, he bid her "Goodnight" and sat back down.

Abel grinned at him and blew a smoke ring. "So glad yer enjoyin' yer visits to me haus, Barney, lad, but ye should get out round women folk mor'."

Barney had left almost immediately afterwards. "I'm never going back there." He told himself as he threw Lady Jane into the wrong gear. "What I am doing hanging around drunks, old maids and destroyed

girls? I can do a whole lot better than this." Almost immediately, he felt sick. What an ugly thought! What was wrong with him tonight? He had to shake it off as he had to finish three chapters tomorrow.

After staying away for two weeks, Barney hopped up Abel's front steps two at a time. He took a deep breath. Was that pork? No, venison? He could hardly wait for another Valancy meal.

Cissy let him in. The fire was low in the grate. The house seemed strangely quiet.

"Where is Miss Stirling?" popped out.

"Well, she's, she's out."

"Out? Out where?"

"Out with Father."

"When will she be back?"

"Quite late. I think that we have some-"

"Did your father drop her off for a visit at home? He's going to Chidley Corners tonight to play at the dance he told me. I came to spend the evening with you both. Should I go pick her up?"

"Father, took her to the dance with him."

"Oh, no, he didn't. Miss Stirling? She would never go to a place like that. She is a lady personified."

"Well, I don't think that she really understood what it would be like. I didn't want her to think that I begrudged her going."

"How could she not?"

Cissy's manner began to alarm him. She tried to explain ending with, "Even Father said how nice she looked. She's only ever been with gentlemen before. I don't know if she understands, if she realizes. Some of the boys may be drunk. She may trust them because she's seen them at dances out front or even know them through her cousin, Olive Stirling. Boys from the Port. They may, may not listen if she says 'no'. I don't know if she'll know what to do. What may happen. I'm very worried for her. She might-"

Barney had already turned on his heels and leaped into Lady Jane. He tore down the road to Chidley Corners. He barely parked before he jumped over the unopened door and ran into the dance. The stench of whiskey filled the air. There was open affection out in the parking lot - and worse on the lawns under the trees in the shadows. Barney furiously thought, "Valancy better be inside dancing. One of these girls had better NOT be her. If it is, I'll kill him and swing for it."

As he dashed into the open hall, he grabbed a chair and stood on it, scanning over the heads of the dancers. Some drunk had his hands all over Valancy as she resisted him.

Just in time.

Pushing roughly through the crowd, Barney whipped him around and smashed a neat right clear across his jaw with all his fury breaking out. The jerk flew backwards.

Valancy looked terrified. Barney pulled her along after him. Holding her incredibly tiny waist, he swung her out the window behind him and gently dropped her onto the lawn. He swung out the window and landed next to her. As he grabbed her hand, a sudden blast of sweet clover hit him. Her glittery green eyes gazed trustingly up at him as he ordered her to run. He snatched her hand, racing back with her to Lady Jane. As they ran, he felt strangely exhilarated - the smell of clovers, her soft skin, her trusting eyes, the feel of her tiny little fingers squeezing his rough hand tightly. A sudden urge to kiss her rose up. "I'm about to get beaten to within an inch of my life and blamed those fellows for wanting to kiss her in the moonlight - and here I am thinking of the same thing. Abel's right. I'm not around women enough." He ran faster until reached Lady Jane.

Valancy dropped oddly white and gasping onto a fallen log. He felt like berating her, but hadn't the heart when he saw her face. He could only call her a "goose" and demand to know why she'd come. It was just like Cissy said, she claimed to not know what it would be like.

Barney didn't know if he wanted to shake her, beat her or kiss her in relief that she was all right. They both heard the chasing group head the wrong way, but he told Valancy that they needed to move quickly to ensure they didn't catch up with them.

After saying he'd take her home, Barney hurried her into the car, threw it into gear and tore off down the road. When they had some safe distance behind them, Barney began to watch Valancy without seeming like he was all through their drive. She was smiling about something. What was she doing with her hand? Oh, feeling the air as they drove. What was so funny? She leaned back and laughing quietly up at the stars.

Barney shook his head. What kind of a crazy girl was this? Runs away from her family to 'work out'. Buys a dress that in backwater Deerwood would torpedo your reputation even if living in the same house with a drunk and a girl who had an illegitimate child wasn't enough. Goes to wild, drunken parties. Has to be saved by a tramp from a jerk with a lot more than dancing on his mind. And at the end of the day, she's smiling, up and ready for more.

"No, no, no!" Lady Jane made a sad, chugging sort of noise - exactly like she did when she was out of gas. "I'm an idiot." Barney explained to Valancy that he meant to fuel up in Deerwood, but forgot all about when he went to get her. They were stuck.

Yep, she's smiled. She gets told that she's marooned out in the woods with a supposed known criminal. At night. Probably has to sleep in the car with him. And she smiles. Delightedly.

Barney looked away from her to hide his grin when she happily turned towards him declaring that she had no reputation to lose and didn't mind at all. He laughed and agreed that he didn't either. They agreed

not to talk - after she quoted his own words to him.

Not talking to Valancy wasn't hard. Watching her was entertaining. She wasn't trying to hide her facial expressions. She would furrow her brows, almost laugh, appear dreamy as each consecutive thought passed through her mind. She was smiling as if in ecstasy, nearly shining with happiness or sighing as if in despair.

Barney passed the time adding commentary and weaving a story in his mind.

"Oh, dear. I am stuck with this strange criminal. (brows) What would my mother say? (laugh) Maybe a respectable, handsome fellow from the Port will be out for a night's drive and rescue me. (dreamy expression)" Barney soon had a whole exciting tale of "Miss Stirling & the Evil Woodsman" written in his mind. The ending when he shoots the respectable fellow from the Port and takes the fellow's new car while leaving Valancy with Lady Jane, the fellow's body and the gun with her finger marks on it was his favorite part. What would he do next? He'd have to make a run for it. What's an exciting way to get away?

"Have you ever dreamed of ballooning?" She answered him. He hadn't meant to say that aloud and quickly thought. "Better keep talking. I don't think she'd appreciate my story very much as I sail away to start my life in the Himalayas."

Barney thought he'd covered his tracks pretty well when Valancy did the oddest thing. She confided in him. No one confided in him. Ever. Barney listened with a new understanding of this strange little woman with no past, no present and probably no future. She had no money. No education to speak of. No hope of a profession. No friends except for one disgraced girl who was actively dying. Yet, how she talked about things! She wasn't complaining, only explaining. She accepted her life and wished for better things, but without resignation or resentment. There was still something about it, though. She talked as though her life was over. He didn't understand her.

And this pathetic little Blue Castle of hers. Acceptance, position, and love. What all women crave the most - someone to really love you. Barney had an unwanted thought flash across his mind. Life is so unfair. This girl should have had everything that Ethel did. She would have been a queen of grace, kindness and goodness. Ethel deserved this girl's life. It would do her good to feel a little rejection and degradation.

They began to talk about her family. They talked through almost every member. They certainly had the time. Barney heard the pain in her voice as she talked about her cousin Olive. He knew her. She was a stunning woman. And when he saw her, she walked right by an elderly lady who needed help without even seeing her. Oh, yes, he knew Olive Stirling. He knew just what she'd be like.

Valancy explained that she'd never lived, but that she was living now. She desperately told him that she didn't even love her mother.

"Why would you?" Barney thought as he began to feel a burn of resentment towards her family. "And what is wrong with these Muskoka fellows? Are they blind to women of worth? Chasing her cousin when

they could have her." He felt a sinking feeling of humiliation. Carrie Martin. She was always doing charitable projects and help, but he'd never paid her a second thought. Only Ethel's beauty. That's all he'd cared about. He gave her a character she didn't have because she was pretty. He was no different, was he? At least, he'd grown up - when it didn't matter anymore.

Valancy began to talk about the moonlight - just like one of his favorite books that Valancy seemed to have memorized from cover to cover. Barney looked her full in the face. That's what she is - Moonlight. Quiet. Demur. Peaceful. Kindly. Tender. Soft. Gentle. Loving. Good. With a strange sort of not beauty that is beautiful. At the same time, she's ignored, overlooked, and out of reach. Mysterious - only those who really tried were ever able to appreciate her or the moonlight's true perfection and beauty.

His story came back to mind. He mentally crushed it up and threw it away. He was like all the rest of them. Mocking her. Making a fool out of her. She was probably the best person he'd ever met. No, that didn't go far enough. She was fit for a king's son - and not a patent medicine king's son either. What a strange thought! If he were Bernard Redfern and she had been born into Montreal society, he would have never stood a chance with her. She would have been entirely out of his league. His money would mean nothing to her. He would be judged on his character. He chased women based on their faces and figures, not their hearts and souls. He had been mistreated as she had, but he had reacted in anger, resentment, and selfishness. Not Valancy. She endured it patiently before finally 'rebelling' by devoting her entire life to a dying friend, giving up everything that she had and all hope of the future that she wishes and dreams of having. No, he would have not measured up to her standard. She was good to her evil mother while he hadn't even talked to his loving, kind father for years.

There was no doubt about it - Valancy Stirling was a queen.

The queen sneezed again. Barney noticed that she didn't have a wrap, but did have bumps all up and down her arms. All he had was his coat, but it'd have to do. He'd do something to make it up to her for the story - even though she knew nothing about it.

Asking Valancy to sit forward, he wrapped his thick, worn overcoat around her, gently pushing her back and buttoned it up for her. She looked up into his face as though she were trying to read his mind. She was only inches away from his face. He repressed the resurrected urge to kiss her. Didn't she realize you can't be so close to a fellow looking at him like, like, well, giving him the impression that you wouldn't mind at all and expect him to have some sort of super self-control? After she quietly thanked him, he looked down at her, swallowed hard, and nodded quickly after he finished tucking it around her. He moved back to his side of the car so far that his whole side leaned on his door.

Valancy snuggled down into the folds, sighing contentedly. Yep, she's back to smiling. A dirty, smelly coat is yet another thing to smile about. Of course. Barney watched her smiling without any new literary inspirations. Soon, he thought he saw lights coming. "Thank God! I don't know how much longer I could have held out."

Was that? It was! The very same cousin Olive and her father - which

uncle was he? They were all Mr. Stirling. He'd go with that.

After a tense exchange with whatever Mr. Stirling this was, Barney filled up Lady Jane with gas watching Olive and Valancy having a strange conversation. Olive was definitely not happy while Valancy seemed decidedly amused. Once he had paid the uncle for gas, they continued their drive back to Abel's.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Did you win?"

Valancy didn't answer, but looked rather triumphant.

"I said, did you win?"

"Yes."

"Good for you."

Barney took back his coat and walked Valancy up to the door of Abel's house, making sure that she could get in. Valancy thanked him again for "coming to my rescue, Mr. Snaith".

"I think after tonight, Miss Stirling, we are true friends. Shall we dispense with the formalities?"

Valancy smiled up into his face. "Thank you, Barney. I am glad that we are friends."

"So am I. And I'm glad I was in time, but I don't ever want to do it again. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Good, next time I'll take you out when you need some fun. That will save me the trouble." Realizing what she may think he said, he abruptly turned and walked back to Lady Jane, waving 'Goodnight' and drove off.

Chapter 6

Barney spent the next week working like a man possessed. He was determined to get his first draft of Blue Happiness done by Friday - and he did.

At 4:00, he pushed his chair back, stretched his fingers and jumped up. "I feel like celebrating. I should go have a night in the Port. Yes, that's a good idea."

Barney locked up his lean-to and started heading down to his boat. "Wait. I shouldn't go like this. What am I thinking?"

Barney returned to his house, put some hot water to boil and took out his last set of clean clothes. He laid them down on his bed before he walked outside and using a knife pried the old mud out of his boots before he brushed and washed them. Much better. He took a quick bath and walked out of his bedroom again to grab his razor. He shaved, got

dressed and put on his cleanish boots. After brushing his teeth and attempting to comb his hair, he ran down to his canoe.

A movie. That's what he'd do.

As he passed, he saw Valancy outside in the flower garden. He asked her to come along. He wasn't worried about it. He knew she'd understand. They had decided to be friends. He was going out tonight and thought she'd want to come. She did.

Barney was curious to see how long it would take her to ask what they were doing or where they were going. Barney smoked as he drove and made a few passing comments, but didn't tell her. They made it all the way to the theater before Valancy finally said, "Oh, I'm so excited! This is so kind, Barney. Thank you!"

When they arrived at the ticket booth, Barney moved surprised as Valancy tried to pay for her own ticket. He automatically clapped his hand down on her coin and pushed it back to her with "No, I pay. I asked you to come. I could never let a lady pay. Please, Valancy."

Valancy nodded, blushed, and thanked him profusely, making him think, "It's a dime. She acts like we are going to the opera and dinner at Michele's."

Barney offered his arm and walked Valancy to their seats. After the piano started, Valancy jumped as the lights dimmed. After the serial, Barney whispered, "Do you think she'll escape the kidnapper?"

Valancy laughed aloud and got roundly "Shhhh" 'd.

Midway through the feature, a detective mystery, Valancy leaned forward, gripping her seat. Barney watched her amused. A silent gunshot went off. Valancy jumped with a cry. Barney laughed quietly. This was the most entertaining movie he'd ever been to, but this time his laughter at Valancy was entirely good-natured. Her bag had dropped to the floor when she jumped.

Barney leaned over to find it before seeing it under her chair. He and Valancy leaned down to get it at the same time. He wound up with a face full of her hair as she came up with it. She stammered an apology and leaned far away from him. Barney turned away, grinning and shaking his head. Without looking at her, he saw her clinging to her bag but again enthralled by the film.

Barney felt like he was having the time of his life. Valancy was so tremendously excited, happy, and smiling. And her hair smelled like roses.

Maybe she wanted to get dinner before they went home.

"Well, did you like it?"

"Oh! I loved it! It was astonishing!"

Barney laughed hard. "Well, should we get some dinner? Are you hungry?"

"Oh, at a restaurant? I've only been once. I'd never been to a movie before. And this was only my second time in a car, you know. This is all so exciting."

Barney's inner anger that had been growing whenever he thought about Valancy's upbringing sparked again. He was going to walk over to the hot dog stand, but not now. He would give her a real treat. No wonder she was acting so excited! She had never done this before! She'd also probably never had a fellow take her anywhere - even just a friend like him.

"Well, then, let's go to a Chinese restaurant. I'm guessing you've never had Chinese food either."

She'd beamed at him excitedly and actually clapped her hands before apologizing.

Barney offered his arm with "Well, Miss Stirling, allow me to take you to dinner."

Valancy looked so pleased and blushed as Barney thought. "Does it really take nothing to make this woman happy?"

When they sat down, Barney ordered for them and started to talk to Valancy who was looking down with sheer terror on her face. He leaned closer to her and whispered, "What's the matter?"

"What do I do with the sticks? I'm not supposed to do anything musical, am I? I don't know how to play an instrument or anything. I never learned."

Barney laughed uproariously without meaning to as Valancy told him to be quiet. He waved over a waiter and asked, "Bring silverware for the lady, please."

Over dinner, he moved over next to her and taught her how to use chopsticks.

"Well, I think we can pretty much say that you're terrible at this. Here." Barney walked over to a table, picked a clean pair, and stuck them into her hair knot. "You can wear yours. And if you ever get hungry, you are all set."

Over dinner, Barney kept questioning her to try to find out what her future plans were, but she seemed evasive, almost sad. Maybe she realized her future depended on Cissy's death and didn't want to talk about it.

Instead, he talked about his travels. She seems stunned that he's been to India and China. He told her all about his work in rice fields, the elephants, tigers, the British citizens living there and how all the various people lived. She listened in rapt attention was shining eyes.

As Barney paid the bill, he told Valancy to leave her chopsticks in and paid an extra 35 cents for them as a memento for her.

"Valancy, your listening to me talk for almost an hour has flattered me into being magnanimous. Do you want some ice cream? You have had ice cream, right?"

"Yes, four times. I loved it."

Barney handed her a cone with three huge scoops. "Eat it all. Who knows when you'll get it again."

Heroic Valancy did her best as they walked by the waterfront in pensive silence with only an occasional remark.

At 9:30, Barney began their drive home. As he drove, Valancy leaned back looking at the stars smiling.

Barney smoked contentedly.

When they got to Abel's, Barney told her that this was a night of firsts so she had to sit still. Barney walked around the car and opened her door for her which he told her was common politeness before offering his arm again and walking her to the door. After they said "Goodnight", Valancy smiled sweetly up at him. He looked down at her and smiled. She certainly would never be pretty, but she had such nice eyes, especially now looking at him so delightedly, sweetly.

There wasn't any harm in it. They were friends. She probably wouldn't mind. She would understand he didn't really mean anything serious by it. They weren't young kids anymore. She had such strangely red lips. Her hair smelled so faintly of roses. After all, it's not like, as she said in the car, that she has a reputation to lose. From all she had told him, he had pretty much figured out that she's never been kissed. Tonight seemed as good a night as any. She smiled at him again. Was she asking him to?

"Did you need something else, Barney?"

"Yes, I mean, tonight's been a night of firsts. So, I thought, I thought, maybe—" Barney stepped closer to her, looking into her mysterious, alluring eyes. He slowly bent towards her.

"Why are you staring at me? Do I have something on my face?" Valancy asked in confusion.

Barney snapped out of it. "No, I wasn't thinking. I, I, I was, I mean. Have a goodnight, Valancy."

As she thanked him puzzled, he quickly hopped down the steps and jumped into Lady Jane. "What was I doing?" is all he could think as he drove off. When he was out of earshot, he howled with laughter and shook his head. Trying to kiss a Deerwood old maid just because they'd seen a movie together. What was the matter with him?

Chapter 7

The next day, a more somber, not quite so celebratory Barney stopped in on his way to Deerwood. Cissy and he talked for a long time. Valancy was upstairs cleaning. Cissy went up to see if Valancy needed anything. She'd come down to say "hello" and thank him as she gave him a short list. He had planned to explain to make sure she understood about yesterday, but she was so normal that he knew instantly no explanation was necessary. She'd understood, enjoyed it

as a kindness he'd done her and nothing else. Barney felt immense relief.

Valancy walked out with him despite him saying twice that it wasn't necessary. A tearful Valancy told him that Cissy was getting decidedly worse. She slept very little and the coughing fits were lasting longer.

Barney gently reassured her, "We all know that it's coming this year. I have no doubt you have extended her life and made the end much happier than it would have been. I think that's a very fine thing to do, you know."

"Do you? I'm very glad to hear you say so." A thoughtful Valancy walked into the house.

Over the next few weeks, Cissy's condition deteriorated. Barney had come to drop off a few things, but he found Valancy sitting in the kitchen, staring at nothing. Softly he pulled out a chair and gently touched her arm with a "Tell me."

"Do you know what happened? With Cissy? I mean, really know?"

"Most of it, I think."

"She refused to marry him."

"No, he made her refuse to marry him. He made sure his hurting, confused very young girl understood he didn't want her so she would declineâ€|. so he could walk. If it ever went to court, he could say she'd declined. I've heard of fellows doing it before." Barney expressed his desire to shoot him.

"I've never understood howâ€|. " Valancy's words died away. She blushed deeply.

Barney looked sideways at her pained, confused face. "I do, Valancy. I've met the kind who do it. I don't want you to ever understand it."

Barney saw tears coming more strongly into her eyes. He tried to make her smile. "So, don't ever go back to Chidley Corners. You got close enough last time."

Valancy laughed sweetly as she wiped her eyes. "We don't have much time left with her."

"No, you've been a real comfort to her, Valancy. Now, come walk me to my car. I'll cut my visit tonight short."

"You haven't eaten. I won't be happy if you go home hungry."

Valancy stood up distracted. Barney watched her make him some sandwiches and vegetables. She automatically sat down next to him again while he ate.

"Did I tell you I sprung a leak in my canoe? I had to swim for it and come back for it later." Barney related a long, exaggerated, funny story about his misadventures. Valancy's laughter rang out. Barney felt relieved to her relaxed, smiling and happy.

When Valancy walked him out, Barney waited while she offered her hand. She looked up at him and smiled. When they shook hands, she told him shyly, "Barney, Cissy told me that she couldn't have endured anything without you. I think you are a very fine man. You praised my helping her, but you did more, much more than I came close to doing."

Barney quietly thanked her and thoughtfully drove home.

As he lay on top of his blankets, Barney stared off thinking, "A few simple words from a slight, little woman in the middle of nowhere touched me more than most of the finest books I've ever read." Forgetting to take off his boots, he fell asleep.

Chapter 8

The next day, Barney rose at dawn, skipped his usual walk, and got to work editing his draft. By mid-afternoon, he'd finished four chapters. The best he'd ever done.

Whistling, he hopped into his canoe, into Lady Jane, and drove over to Abel's. It was only 4:00.

"Why, Barney, what are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd see if you and Cissy wanted to go for a drive."

Valancy sadly shook her head, "Cissy is in bed. She doesn't sleep now. She can't do anything."

Without a word, Barney mounted the stairs. Cissy had always been curious about him, but never asked. Barney turned to Valancy, "I need to talk to Cissy privately, please."

"I will go for a walk a distance from the house to be certain I don't overhear." She immediately left.

Barney knocked on her door, paused, and walked in. Cissy sat by the window on her bed which had been moved. She smiled and whispered, "Have you come to tell me who you are?"

"I have. I am Bernard Redfern, Dr. Redfern's son."

Cissy gasped out, "Oh, Barney! Oh, how funny!" as she laughed immediately collapsing into a coughing fit. Barney put his arm around her as she rested on his shoulder. "I thought. You were going. To say John Foster."

"I am John Foster. How long have you known?"

"I just figured it out. Valancy brought us the last book. It had a section on Blue Jays that I'd heard you say."

"Did you tell-"

"No. You wanted it secret. I didn't tell her."

Barney looked confused. "Her?"

"Valancy."

"Oh, I meant your father."

"No one."

They sat in silence several minutes as Cissy caught her breath.

Barney hugged her gently. "I have loved you like my own sister, Cissy."

"I know. Thank you, Barney. You will be happy again."

Barney laughed cynically. "I'm not a happy person. I'm happy enough."

"I can't talk anymore. I'm going to sleep. Valancy is in the garden. She's the best girl. In the world I think."

"Yes, she has been a good friend to you."

Cissy began to make no sense as she fell asleep. "Despite her own problems. She looked after me. Even being so unhappy. Hoping, I mean, but knowing it won't ever happen."

"What won't happen, Cissy?"

"Go to. Her Own. Home."

"Valancy wants to go home?"

"No. Her Blue Castle. You take her."

"But, Cissy, the Blue Castle isn't real. What does Valancy need me to do? Where does she want to go?"

"I want. You to. Be happy, Barney. Take care of Valancy."

Cissy started coughing. Barney made her comfortable and went downstairs as Cissy finally was able to sleep.

Barney met Valancy in the garden. She was cutting snapdragons and sweet peas.

"I've said goodbye to her."

"Yes, she told me that she had something to tell you. Did she remember? Is it said?"

Barney laughed out loud, "Yes. For all her childlike qualities, she's a woman through and through. No one is safe with a perceptive girl like Cissy around, Valancy."

Valancy made a strange sound and dropped all her flowers. Barney stopped surprised. He carefully picked up the dropped bunch and offered it to Valancy. Softly, he reassured her as she stood with her hands covering her face, strongly blushing. "Cissy told me nothing, Valancy. She told my own secrets. Not yours."

Valancy uncovered her face and laughed. "I'm, I'm sorry." She took the flowers from him.

"Besides, what deep, dark secrets can a Deerwood Stirling woman have? You've probably been married a dozen times. Am I right?"

"Oh, yes. And murdered them all for their money. Roarin' Abel will be my next victim. It's my repayment for-." Valancy stopped short and blushed.

"You can say it. What?"

"For all the time he spends looking at my ankles and neck when he thinks I don't notice."

Barney threw back his head and laughed. "Come walk me out to my car. It's a tradition now."

After they shook hands, Barney smiled at her. "After Cissy's gone, it's back to formality. You will become Miss Stirling once again. Respectable member of Deerwood Society."

"And you can go rob another bank."

"Train this time, actually. I'm bored of banks."

"We still have some time I think."

"Yes, we do. I'm not ready to give up your cooking yet."

"And you never finished telling us about the Inuit village."

"I will. It's a promise."

Barney shook her hands with her again. He leaned on the gate and watched his strange little friend walk into the house. At the door, she turned, looked over her shoulder, and smiled mysteriously at him.

Barney jumped into Lady Jane and started whistling. Halfway home, he stopped guiltily. How could he be so light with Cissy dying?

No, she wanted him to be happy. She'd been so sure that happiness was coming for him. He would be happy for her sake and do whatever he could to make sure her best friend Valancy was happy too.

Chapter 9

The next day, Barney walked back from Denton's Creek with a notebook full of ideas. The spring flowers had burst into bloom. He had spent a lazy afternoon, admiring, studying, classifying and writing notes. He would never admit to it, but he really liked flowers.

When he got back, he was surprised to see a note tacked to his front door, fluttering in the breeze,

Barney,

Cissy left us at sunrise.

I am preparing her for burial today.

The funeral is tomorrow at 11am.

Valancy

Barney read into the brevity that anything more would have caused her too much pain. He immediately locked his notebook up in his lean-to and left for Abel's.

Slowly, he mounted the front steps. Valancy opened the door before he knocked.

"I heard you coming. Thank you."

"Where is she?"

Barney looked down at Cissy's white, peaceful marble face. He expected to have a reaction, but he didn't expect to feel a sense of relief. It was over. Her continual degradation, suffering, humiliation and pain were finally over. He remembered the last death in this house - Cissy's baby. Seeing her rocking the dead child singing to him, barely being able to be persuaded to allow him to be buried. Seeing her lying down on the ground weeping until he had picked her up and carried her to his car, back to her house. Watching her for months holding his blanket or having it by her all the time, always telling him every visit how old he had been at this same time last year or what she had done with him. The most painful had been when she calmly told him, "I slept without waking up for his midnight feeding last night. It only took me three months. I think my grief is getting a little better." as he watched her finger his blanket in her hands.

Barney had known rage, hatred even, but the hatred that he felt for the father of Cissy's child was unlike he'd known before. Cissy would never tell him who he was. And he'd wanted to know. More than once, he had nearly demanded that Cissy tell him, but she never would. Such stupid, misplaced loyalty. He would have traveled to wherever he was and made him face up to his responsibilities. If nothing else, he would have made sure the boy's father knew about it and kept Cissy and her son properly. If he refused, the news of it would have made the scandal sheets if nowhere else. He would have made sure that he suffered in some way. The fact that he had gotten away with it galled him to his inner soul.

Barney _**hated**_ that man.

Valancy hesitantly tapped his arm. He jerked surprised. He had forgotten that she was there. She moved to leave the room. He followed her.

Valancy motioned to him to sit down. She gave him a sort of chowder with bread. As he ate, he unconsciously watched her put the kitchen to rights.

Without meaning to, he thought, "If Valancy had been in Cissy's placeâ€|. A smile broke out over his face. "Heaven help the man who tries to steal Miss Stirling's virtue. That demur, quiet little woman is like the water before rapids, deceptively peaceful." He almost

laughed as he thought of Valancy at the Chidley Corners dance. Surrounded by drunken, interested men, she still retained her polite manners while fighting like a wild cat to get away from one of them. "If any fellow tried it on with her, he better make sure she's not armed. She'd smile politely while saying, 'I am very sorry, but I cannot allow you to do this.' before she shoots him dead." Cissy was right to be concerned, but simply because our Miss Stirling was outnumbered. She's a girl who can take care of herself and a force when roused."

"I saw your mother in Deerwood last week."

"Oh, yes? I didn't know that you knew her."

"Yes. She was in your uncle's store. Your uncle asked about you to her. That's how I realized."

"How did she look?"

Barney regretted bringing it up. He should have suspected the conversation would go this way. He didn't answer.

Valancy quietly finished putting away the dishes before turning to him. "You can answer me honestly."

Barney slowly raised his eyes to meet hers. "She looks like a hard woman, Valancy. Without sympathy, care or love. I'm sorry."

Valancy smiled at him mysteriously. "Then, she's her usual self. Doing well. She was no doubt trying to wheedle Uncle Benjamin down on his prices. We are some of the poor relations, you know. I was supposed to be beautiful and marry money. Poor mother. She didn't get either of her heart's desires."

"Is it such a virtue to marry money?"

"Of course! And beauty runs in the Stirlings, but I got none." Valancy laughed lightly. "I am supposed to resemble my crazy grandfather on my mother's side. He was the only interesting person in the family. I take it as a compliment. And I don't need to marry money. I can work to take care of myself, although my working as a servant has caused my mother to go into fits."

"But, suppose some fellow with money proposed to you?"

"And why would he do that? He would either have some ulterior motive, be suspect in his character or have some reason other than love for doing so. I would refuse him, of course."

"But, what if he had a lot of money, so much money that all your troubles for life were over, you could do anything you wanted to?"

"Barney, this is a very strange conversation."

"I'm only curious. It's the same for men. No girl is as beautiful as one with a rich purse."

"At one time, I would have probably been tempted - for a few seconds, but I would decline. I have lived without love my entire- " Valancy

blushed, stammered and corrected herself. "Almost my entire life. I have no desire to live that way any more. I will either live with the man I love or alone. I will not settle." Valancy's vehemence surprised him. Her childhood must have been harder than he realized even knowing as much as he did. "I am sorry, but we are losing the light. I must go cut flowers for the service tomorrow."

"I'll come with you."

Barney pulled out his pocket knife and under orders from Valancy, cut all she wanted. This garden brought back memories. He'd had a great time with Cissy planning out and planting her flowers when she was expecting the baby. It had distracted her and helped. He remembered her walking through the first blooms very close to her delivery time. She'd cut some white roses, saying, "I know that they are funeral flowers, but to me, there is nothing so perfect as a white rose. It's happiness and life. I don't know why they are used to symbolize death."

"Valancy, I, I want to do something."

Valancy looked up and waited.

"I want us to cut these white roses, and the one over on the arbor and anywhere else we can find. Cissy loved white roses. I want to surround her with them - as the last thing I do for her."

Valancy immediately moved to the arbor and cut. A large pile of roses were carried into the house between the two of them. Barney carefully arranged them all around her body, before he broke down crying. Valancy kindly slipped out the back door and sat on the steps waiting for him.

A short time later, Barney sat down beside her. Barney looked over at Valancy to talk to her. She seemed so strange today. She kept blushing, shaking or looking away from him. "She probably doesn't want me to see her cry. It's probably supposed to be unladylike or something." He looked down at her tiny hands. She was actually trembling.

"Are you doing all right, Valancy?"

"I, I, I'm sorry. I, I-" Valancy paled and appeared distracted. Barney began to grow more concerned. "I just need to go to bed now. I have much to do in the morning. I've done all the cooking and arranging that I can for tonight, but tomorrow, I will be very, very busy."

"I'm not coming."

"No, I'm glad. It will be rather horrible, I think. I hate the thought of it. I can't wait for it to be done."

Valancy raised her tiny head towards the sky. Barney saw lone tears streak her face. He moved closer to her and gently touched her arm. "Forgive me, Valancy. I don't mean to be familiar with you, but you seem so distressed. May I help you in any way?" Barney meant, "Do you need me to hold you?", but clearly Valancy didn't understand him.

"No, thank you. I have everything I need for tomorrow. Jacques ran into town for me and delivered for the note to your house. His employer lent him his dory. You've done a great deal coming today. You have helped me a lot. I sincerely appreciate it. You are always very kind, Barney."

Valancy was breathing oddly and shaking more. Abruptly, she rose with a "Goodnight, Barney. I, I, I won't see you again. I'm going home two days after the funeral. I've already planned it. I can't ever see you again."

Barney caught her hand. "Valancy, wait, please." Her hand was shaking nearly out of control. Tears swam in her eyes.

Barney stood to his feet and faced her. "I want you to know that if you ever need me, you must not hesitate to ask me. I realize your mother won't allow me into her house, but we could always 'accidentally' run into each other. Mail me a letter at Box 42 to the Port Lawrence post office with a few days lead time. And if you are ever unhappy or in real need of advice or anything else, I want you to tell me."

Barney couldn't understand why Valancy appeared to be growing more and more distressed. Tears were running hard down her face. She whispered, "Barney, I, I. Thank you. I wish. I think. I mean, I, I'm sorry. I don't see how it will be possible."

"Do you have no alternatives? Do you have no other option besides your mother's house? No other friends or relations? No one else you can ask? Have you thought about it?"

Valancy laughed rather hysterically as she broke down weeping. Barney held her hand tighter trying to gently reassure her, but he only seemed to upset her more.

"Oh, Barney! Thought about it!" She broke into her rather wild laughter again. "I would give anything. I don't want. I wish. I feel. I'm so."

Barney decided to comfort her as he done with Cissy. He reached out and gently held her face in his hand and stroked her cheek. "Valancy, grief is hard for everyone. You will recover. It will take time. We will both miss Cissy dearly. You were an angel to come care for her. You probably have no idea how much you meant to her. She loved you dearly. I think to do such a thing for a dying girl to one of the finest, best things anyone could do for someone else."

Valancy appeared in shock, frozen. Mechanically, she answered, "It is unladylike to have feelings."

Barney evenly rebuked her, "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard. You're a woman - tender, loving, kind, good. If you didn't grieve for Cissy out of your love for her, you would be an automaton, a machine. No one wants a woman without a heart. NO ONE. Don't let me ever hear you say that again."

"It's what I'm going back to you. It's my mother's policy. You saw her."

"Then, I guess your defiance is going to have to last a little while

longer, isn't it?"

Barney waited for her to react or reply.

Slowly, she raised miserable, forlorn eyes to his face.

"What is it, Valancy? What's wrong?"

Valancy unexpectedly jerked back from him with a desperate "Excuse me." She nearly fled into the house.

Barney sat on the back porch for several more minutes. All those happy times here in this house were over. His first real interactions with others in years had ended. Cissy was dead. Valancy lost to him in the circles of self-important, stupid, dinky Deerwood. Even Abel would probably be impossible to talk to as he would turn to the bottle so heavily to drown his sorrows.

Back to lone walks, lone writing and lone nights in his shack. The appeal wasn't as great as it used to be. He'd missed the times he'd had in this house over the last few months.

Barney folded his arms, sighed and dropped his head.

For the first time ever, he felt lonely, tired, and old.

Chapter 10

Barney frustratingly threw his whole day's work on the floor. A waste. A total whole pages about dying roses. Sad. Morose.

Cissy's death was so hard to take. So unnecessary. Yes, she would have gotten sick. Probably. But, she didn't want to live. She had no reason for living. She desperately wanted her adorable little boy who had been taken away from her too soon. Almost as much, she pathetically dreamed of the day when that worthless coward that she adored with such a vibrant, pure, ardent, girlish love would come back to her. Her words, "I know that he really cared about me, but he was young. I know that he will understand that I still love him and one day come back to me. He didn't mean to hurt me. I know he didn't. It was all just a terrible mistake."

Barney had to clench his teeth as hard as he could that day to not spew out the rage that he felt seeing her trusting, loving eyes as she made excuse after excuse for his behavior, his treachery. He listened to her faithful recitation with shining eyes of his obvious, pathetic lies that she swallowed in her innocence and goodness so easily. Barney struggled in those moments not to want to hunt him down and kill him. He couldn't have even been 'man' enough to admit what he'd done so that she could have grieved for him, stopped loving him and moved on with her life.

Barney pushed away from his writing desk. He needed to clear his head. A good, long walk is what he needed. He got no farther than the front of his shack.

As Barney stared down at the lake, he remembered walking with Valancy to see the actual docks in Port Lawrence. She'd been so excited to see all ships as she ate that incredibly huge ice cream that he finally finished off for her. They had been so happy.

What was she doing now that the funeral was over? She refused to say what she planned to do when Cissy passed away. Probably because she didn't have any choice. Back to Deerwood. Back to her drab, cowed, miserable existence. That poor woman. He wouldn't even be able to see her. Make sure she was all right.

A sudden image popped into his mind. He was standing at Valancy's mother's house - wherever that was - knocking on the door as he stood there in his John Foster clothes. Her mother would open the door and promptly faint backwards he casually announced, "Bernard Redfern of Redfern's Medicines to see Miss Stirling, please".

Barney threw back his head and howled. He could see Valancy's quiet, triumphant smile that she sometimes gave Abel when she won an argument. What would she say? Probably, "Oh, Mother, do excuse me. Mr. Redfern and I are going out to dinner. You know, Mr. Redfern, Mother? He owns the island up back? Dr. Redfern's son?"

Barney laughed to himself. Dear Valancy. "Maybe she needs something. No, Valancy can take care of herself. Well, she probably didn't need anything, but maybe she did. I really should go see. I don't have much time left with her. Once she's at her mother's, I won't be able to see her again."

Without a second thought, he headed down to his canoe. He hopped into Lady Jane and drove off towards Abel's. As he approached, he saw Valancy working in Abel's - no, it was still Cissy's front flower garden. He threw the car into park and hopped out. "Going home, Miss Stirling?"

Barney reverted to his old formality. He expected her to laugh and tease "Mr. Snaith". She didn't. She looked... strange. Barney kept talking and acted as though he only intended to run an errand for her. She must be very upset over Cissy's passing. She could hardly even talk. She was strangely wringing her hands as though she were in despair or very nervous. Every time she looked up at him she was seem to pale then blush. He had never seen her like this.

Valancy asked him a question.

Barney froze. What did she say? Am I asleep? Am I going mad? Wait. For all the world, it had sounded as though she had just proposed to me. Wait. This was a jokeâ€|.but why did she look so serious, intense?

Barney said something, but didn't really know what it was.

Valancy was breathless, insisting that she was in earnest.

Barney's head swam. "Why on earth would she want to marry me? She knows. It's the money. How did she find out? How long has she known? No, not Valancy. If she had known, she would have said something. She can't keep up any kind of a pretense. That acting game she and Cissy played, she was horrible at it. Maybe, maybe she suspects I'm John Foster. No, it could be that she really doesn't know. Home is so bad that she'd even rather throw herself at a tramp and desperately hope that he'll be good to her. Does she really not want to go so badly? So much that she'd stoop to marrying me?" He looked down at his clothes and felt a growing conviction that she knew something. She

had to. No respectable woman was desperate enough to want him under any circumstances. He wasn't good-looking or impressive or clean even. If even millions hadn't been enough to make him loveable. Old wounds smarted for the time in years. Who did this woman think she was to make fun of him like this? To think she could fool him into thinking she really wanted him? How dare she!

As his thoughts raged, he only managed to say, "But why, why?"

Paper. She was handing him a piece of paper. This would explain it. Now, he would understand. Something solid. Something tangible. Something that probably made sense.

Barney snatched at it as though it were a life raft and began to read.

"Dear Miss Sterling..."

Barney's heart sank as he read the rest of the words on the page. The fire of his anger extinguished. Sick. He felt just sick. Every woman he cared about died. His mother, Cissy, Valancy. Even Ethel had died in a way. The Ethel he thought he loved was not the Ethel who was real.

As he reread it, he glanced up several times watching Valancy closely. She was entirely red. She was looking him straight in the eyes, seeming so nervous as to his reaction. When he finished reading, Valancy closed her eyes, hung her head and began visibly shaking. Barney was almost positive that he heard her whisper, "Fear is the original sin." Her eyes rose ever so slowly to look him in the face. She took a few steps closer to him. He could hear her ragged breathing before she deeply inhaled, raised her chin almost proudly and gazed distinctly into his eyes.

Barney met hers without hesitation. She turned almost crimson, quickly looked away but immediately met his again. She seemed to be asking him a question with her eyes. There was something. Barney tried to read her expression which she seemed so dearly in earnest about.

Wait a second. What exactly was she asking him? Her breathing was coming quick and shallow. Her hands were slightly trembling. Barney suddenly had the thought flash across his mind, "This woman is nearly overcome with desire for ME." What was she asking him to do? Was she actually asking him if he would be willing to - her eyes...How she was looking at him! She was.

Barney looked deeply into her eyes as he felt a slow, excited smile spread across his face as much as he tried to withhold it. Well, well, well, wonders will never cease. He could barely restrain himself from howling with laughter. Not that it was funny, but out of sheer amazement. What was wrong with this woman? Wild for a dirty, rough, backwoodsman?

"Maybe it's just me." Repeated several times in his mind. Slowly, he allowed it more audience as he considered it. "Maybe she really does care about me. As impossible as that is, maybe, maybe it's true. She doesn't know what she's doing. She doesn't really love me, but she actually likes me. Respects me a bit maybe."

Barney grinned broadly at her. Her shoulders seemed to be fall a good six inches as she exhaled, looked tremendously relieved, and beamed at him, smiling hugely.

A sudden urge to seize her and kiss her rather wildly, without worrying about being respectable, how he'd always wanted to kiss a woman who really wanted him, welled up. He pushed hard against the gate, but it didn't move. Locked. Abel's annoying habit of locking his fences like he lived in a war zone. Who did he think would rob his ramshackled house? Barney felt frustration growing. He wanted to hold her NOW.

Valancy had unconsciously taken a few steps closer to him as she smiled so, so, well, adoringly is the only word for it, up at him.

Barney bit his lip and considered what he could do. In that moment, he knew he had no chance of kissing her. "YOU IDIOT! Why didn't you get cleaned up before you came over here to talk to a lady? You're paying for it."

Immediately, he had a new, very appealing idea. "Was Abel going to be home tonight? He could use Abel's stuff. If he comes home, how would he even know, notice? He was so drunk most the time. He'd never realized. How can I ask her? She'd let me stay maybe. Who knows when we can get married? She -" Barney shook his head quickly and felt a burst of embarrassment, shame. "What is wrong with me? I despise men who don't treat women honorably while I plan to talk a good, God-fearing woman into giving me a night before she's my wife. Get control, Redfern. You can do itâ€|.but I'm not waiting long. No way. When we can we get married? Tomorrow. Why not? There's no reason. She won't have to go home then. She'd like that best. That would be best for Valancy. Without a doubt." Barney felt his face shoot red. "What a sacrificial fellow I am! Regular patron saint. Don't fool yourself, Redfern. You aren't doing it for her. Well, she did ask me. I'm helping both of us. There are worse ways of performing good deeds, helping others. As they say, charity begins at home." He reverted to grinning at her.

Barney's heart had never pounded so hard. His hands shook. He carefully folded the paper and then put his hands behind his back as he tried to gain control. Well, he would get to give her a first kiss after all.

When he had sufficient control over his voice, he asked something. He couldn't place figure out what he had said, but she answered with "I love you."

So, it was true. She did really, truly care about him. No one could look like that or sound so, so, well, sincere. Valancy believed she was in love with him.

Immediately, his mind left the garden. Visions of holding her in his arms, kissing her in front of the fire in his parlor, well it wasn't really parlor, his big room, before he carried her into his room to lie her down on his bed. Her mysterious eyes would look just like they did now. When he leaned close to her, her hair would smell like roses. Maybe she would caress his chest with her tiny fingers before she wrapped her arms around his back and hold onto him tightly as

they shared a kiss - deep, long with uncontrolled passion. Her neck was so alluring. He'd kiss it while he - STOP. No more. Keep control.

With tremendous effort, Barney got his mind back to the present. But he had to hold on to the gate for dear life. He couldn't look at her. He turned his focus to a star just over Abel's chimney. He brought his reason back into reign.

He had to know what she knew.

As he slowly started to say "I may be a murderer", he waited for a reaction.

Valancy tenderly met his eyes as her soft, sweet voice declared that she didn't care. She loved him unconditionally.

This woman really believed that he was a tramp with no money who did nothing but read a lot of books and lived on an island. Who had some money maybe - that she wouldn't have even known where it came from. Quite possibly married to a criminal hiding out from the law. A criminal who hardly ever wore clean clothes. Who drove a dilapidated old car that continually broke down. Who had no friends. Who was an outcast from all good society. Yet, she wanted to marry him. Because she loved him.

The only emotion beyond shock that struggled to take the pre-eminence was passion. He didn't really ever expect to feel that way towards Valancy, but he never had a woman declare her love for him and ask him toâ€|.well, he didn't know what to say.

Say? Barney realized that he never answered her. He had not accepted or declined her proposal. She was so happy, seemed to believe he had accepted without saying so. "I should decline. I don't love her. I don't care about her that way. She's a dear woman, but she is not at all the sort of woman I could ever love." An internal struggle broke out. He had to own to himself that he did not want to give up having a woman in his arms, with him every night - and when it was a woman who loved you, a woman like Valancy. Such a good, kind, sweet, caring woman. Well, what was the harm? She wanted him to. It would only be for a very short time. Besides, Valancy had given up her old life to make Cissy's happy in the last days. He had praised her for it. He could do it for Valancy.

Barney made his decision. He would set his terms, tell her flat out that he had no love for her and leave the decision with her. If she still wanted him after all that, he'd marry her.

Very carefully he began to outline his requirements for their relationship and for her access to the cabin.

To his complete surprise, Valancy absolutely agreed with all of his requirements and accepted them without hesitation - even the requirement to live on his island.

What kind of a crazy woman was this?

That decided it. They were engaged.

Valancy began to talk, requiring that he never talk about her being

sick or treat her like she was sick. Barney felt relieved. That's just what he wanted. A normal, happy life for however long it lasted.

Valancy handed him a letter for her family at the time of her death. Barney joked about it, but he felt his stomach tighten. Underneath it all, this whole arrangement was pathetically sad. She was so happy. He'd do what she asked and just enjoy the best in every day.

Barney suggested that they get married the next day. Who knew how sick she really was? He should make sure she got her dream of being his wife. What a thought! He'd never thought of himself as someone's dream man, but look at her face! She was overjoyed. Yes, that was the right decision. Much better to get married immediately to give her what she wanted. "Back to being the patron saint, I guess. How generous of me! Pretending I'm not thinking that I want to be sure that I have a few nights with her at least."

Barney somehow finished talking to Valancy. After letting go of her hands that he hadn't realized he was holding, he watched her, his fiancée, walk into the house. He was an engaged man for the second time in his life. He hadn't slept the first time. Somehow, he doubted he'd sleep this time either.

This time tomorrow, he'd be a married man. He'd have his wife nestled in his arms, cuddled into his chest, probably kissing him. He let out a huge breath.

Why was he standing there staring at an empty porch? He had to get ready for his wedding.

Barney walked to Lady Jane, but looked back towards Abel's door. "I never imagined overlooking a drunk's misdemeanors for the sake of his mistreated daughter and child would win myself a wife. What other fellow ever got a wife with no effort? And a queen at that." A wave of sheer happiness swept over him. "I Can. Not. Believe. That. Just. Happened. Incredible. One of the best days of my life."

Barney looked up at where Valancy's room would be, although he couldn't see her window. It was their last night apart.

Only, what? Barney checked his watch. 22 hours until the wedding.

Barney hopped into Lady Jane and drove off whistling The Wedding March.

Chapter 11

Barney kept his composure until he was out of sight of Roaring Abel's. A broad grin broke out across his face. "Well, you never know. That quiet, demur, respectable little old maid so in love with me that she proposes to me." He did not fool himself that her affection really had anything to do with him or his character. Any man who had paid her any attention, who was kind to her would have won her devotion.

Yet, he couldn't help but feel flattered. The poor dying girl chose to spend her final days with him. His thoughts turned to tomorrow night. That has been another surprise. He laughed, remembering

looking up from the letter and meeting her eyes with his unspoken question. She raised her blushing face unashamed to his, met his eyes - a clear "yes". Her blush deepened as she recognized his silent agreement as he knew his eyes betrayed him and the smile that had unintentionally spread on his face before his forced calm, seriousness in asking if she was sure of her diagnosis. He'd had to say something while he got control of himself - even a fool thing like that. The letter made it entirely clear. No one could think otherwise.

As she blushed and answered him in her summery, sweet voice, looking at him so, so, well, it had taken great self-possession - and the unwelcome barrier of the closed gate - to not take her into his arms right then. He never really ever thought about how he'd react to have a woman tell him that she loved him and wanted him to, well, now he knew. He was glad it'd never happened before. Who knew what ridiculous, crazy thing he'd have done? He had to at least touch her somehow. That irritating gate. He was going crazy inside. She didn't seem to realize anything unusual was happening. He'd had to wrap his arms around the gate to stop from slamming it open and holding her. What a strange woman! Willing to marry him even if he was a killer, a criminal, a "destroyer of women"! Was she crazy? What did she mean by it?

At least he'd managed to seem perfectly calm and rational, setting his terms. Had she agreed or not? She must have, or he wouldn't have said he'd marry her. Probably, although it'd really been pretty devastating when she declared she'd marry him, dirty and unkempt as he was with her little white face, blushing up, looking at him so earnestly, adoring almost. In that moment, he would have promised her anything or done anything she wanted. He'd lost the internal battle, but the gate was locked. He had to reach over it to hold her hands. At least, he'd been honest with her as to how he felt, but "a bit of a dear"? Had he really said that? To the brave little dying woman who just asked to marry him? Maybe he had been living in the woods too long if he couldn't even remember how to talk to women. And her shy, happy eyes. The face of the woman who wanted him to, well, he almost couldn't resist. No wonder he'd fumbled for words. He had been looking at her rosy mouth. Seeing her so happy that he'd agreed. He had been about to pull her to him when he'd suddenly remembered.

Barney scratched his bristly chin. "Can't kiss a woman like this. Best reason in the world to shave, though. If I'd shaved this morning, I'd probably be sitting in Abel's back garden kissing her right now. That's a good lesson to me to stop being so lazy. Cost me dearly today."

Barney whistled and laughed. His thoughts turned serious as he considered what he was really taking on. Would she like the the island? Would she really be content? What if he found that he really couldn't live with her? Giving a dying woman her last wish sounded very fine and noble, but would they really get on together? Or would it really be a punishment for them both? A slow feeling almost like fear started to creep up on him. He really didn't know her at all. What was he doing?

The feeling left almost as soon as it came. This was Valancy. The kind, generous, caring woman who had given up her own reputation to help an old friend. She'd been easy to talk to over dinner, grateful

for the smallest things. She was the only real 'stirling' among the lot of her self-important clan. Things wouldn't be perfect, but it would be all right. The worst would probably be having to listen to her quote all his books to him so rapturously as though he were some oracle. Well, even that was rather funny. She was clearly in love with John Foster and Barney Snaith. Maybe some day, he'd tell her.

Barney's trip back home ended quickly. His eyes traveled around his property as though seeing it as a visitor would. Was his wood pile really so precarious? She'd need wood for her kitchen fires. It was an outright danger to her. Kindling. Did he have any? No. He needed to chop kindling. Barney headed towards his outhouse and stopped in his tracks. It was awful, hardly fit for him. He could never expect her to use it. Tomorrow morning. First light.

With so much to do, Barney retired early. He laid on his back with his hands clasped behind his head. He remembered to kick off his boots. Without meaning to, he turned towards the other side of his bed. Tomorrow, Valancy would be there. This was his last night alone, at least for a while. That slow creeping nervousness came back.

Barney rolled over to sleep. That smell. His sheets. When had he last washed his sheets?

Barney jerked to sitting up. His blanket had actual mud on it. All those nights of forgetting to take off his boots. Did he have any clean clothes? He jumped out of bed. No. Everything was dirty. His boots. He hadn't realized how bad they really were. Everything was muddy. Valancy had said she'd marry him as he stood, but that was no excuse to not make something of an effort. He'd get new boots. This was a dying girl's wedding day.

Besides, he couldn't take her to this filthy bed of his. She'd never want to. She'd probably feel like he was disgusting and dirty himself. Refuse to - New sheets. Probably no time. There was a laundry at the Port. He'd take his linens to have them washed. Bathing towels. He only had one. Dish towels. Did he have any? He'd buy new linens, get the blanket washed, and have a bath and shave in town.

Why did he say that he'd marry her tomorrow? He'd never get this all done.

Barney woke before dawn after a fitful sleep, agitated by all he had to do and unbidden dreams of the night before him. He made more than one enemy of his neighbors by restacking part of his wood pile, splitting kindling by the light of his lamps, sawing out new planks, and hammering away as he repaired the outhouse. He'd forgotten that the door didn't completely close. He had to rehang it, fix the interior, and clean it thoroughly. He decided that he had to paint it. That would help a lot. And get an actual seat.

After gathering his laundry and his alarmingly long list, Barney motored to the Port in his disappearing propellor boat. If he went by Roaring Abel's, he might see Valancy. Bad luck to see the bride the day of the wedding. That might be important to her. Better not risk it.

Barney rushed through his list. The bank. The laundry. The department store for boots, linens, outhouse supplies, oil and wicks for the lamps, paint, brushes, a new razor. He'd need to keep shaving, every day probably. His beard was so wiry. His whiskers would hurt her soft, white skin. She'd turn her strangely red lips away and not want to kiss him. He'd - Barney forced his attention back to his list. Back to the boat to load up. Back to the laundry. He was glad that they were still old-fashioned enough to offer bathing facilities.

After his bath, Barney changed into his clean clothes and handed over the ones he was wearing, paying for a rush cleaning. Back to the barber for a shave, but no time for a haircut. Off to the government office to wait in the infernally long line to get his license. They'd been closed the whole morning.

He'd done the best he could. He didn't look so bad. His clothes were clean. His boots were smart. He'd paid extra for the closest shave he could get. His hair was clean and presentable, if a little ragged. Valancy had very dark hair. It was thin, but soft. At the theatre, he'd reached over to help her when her bag fell. She'd misunderstood which way he was leaning. She'd been so embarrassed when her face was right in his as her hair had brushed his face. It had smelled like roses. He'd almost lost his head when she blushed so sweetly and apologized. He smiled as he admitted to himself that it was the reason he'd took her to dinner. That and she'd been so enthusiastic, so grateful over such a small thing. That light in her eyes. He'd rather liked seeing her so happy and smiling so much. He wondered if she'd looked that way when - Barney consulted his list.

Back to the laundry, and he could go home. Barney put down his billfold and looked through his laundry pile to make sure he had everything. The blanket was tattered, but it was clean. He couldn't buy all new things. She would figure out that something was not right.

"Congratulations. When is the happy day?"

"I beg your pardon."

"I see your license. Are you getting married?"

"Ah, yes. Today."

"OH!" The old woman appeared shocked.

"We are marrying quietly at my lady's request. She is a very sensible, fine woman. She didn't want a fuss." Why was he telling her all this? He was acting like he was bragging about it. It was nobody's business that he was getting married today.

"And did you choose the ring, or did you let her pick it out?"

RING! How could he have not thought of a ring!

"I'm going to the jeweler next. I don't have it yet."

"I wish you many happy years together."

"Thank you, but we won't. Will! Thank you." What a bumbling fool! "I

have to get to the jeweler's." Except now, he had his laundry. Another trip back to the boat.

The sun was lower in the sky. It was after 3. He was running out of time. Barney ran up to the middle of the Port. Into the jeweler's.

The jeweler did not seem impressed by him. After making him wait for no reason and hearing his request, the jeweler showed Barney his cheapest, simplest ladies' band.

Barney slapped down his cash. He pointed to a dainty, elegant, thicker band. "Something like that. Quality. And small. Very small. She has tiny fingers."

The wide-eyed jeweler hurriedly offered Barney his best band in the correct size. "Fine. I'm in a hurry. Wrap it, please." Barney waited impatiently as the jeweler's assistant ran to get a more expensive box and wrapping.

Barney ran down to his boat. He stopped short as he past the general store. Groceries. He had no food. What would she want? Barney dashed inside, trying to remember all the things he bought for her in the past. He couldn't do this.

Facing the shop assistant, he ordered, "Bread, milk, cheese, eggs, cod, flour, sugar, what else do I need?"

"For what recipe?"

He'd have to tell her. "My new wife is coming today. Getting married. I'm going to be late for my wedding. I only have 10 minutes. I don't know what I'm supposed to get. I forgot to ask her."

With a decidedly disgusted look, the young woman flew around the shop until he had a small mountain of food before him.

"Enough for a week of meals. Plus all her essentials for baking. 15.46. Arthur! Come help carry."

Barney and Arthur hurried with their two large boxes of groceries back down to the boat. How was he ever going to get this all unloaded? When they were done loading, Arthur just stood there. What did the kid want? Oh, a tip, of course. Barney wasn't sure how much to give him and handed over 75 cents. Arthur looked like it was his birthday and ran off with a whoop.

It was after 4. He sped as fast as he could back to his island.

After 4:30. In only two hours, he was supposed to be picking up Valancy.

Running back and forth, Barney carried his load into the house before painting the outhouse with more speed than accuracy.

After setting water to boil on the oil stove so that he could wash up again, Barney carried in wood for the kitchen fires, including the new kindling. She would probably use the oil stove for most meals, but he should be ready just in case. He found a corner the older

sheets and new bathing and kitchen towels. He went around the house filling up the lamps with oil, adding a few new wicks. He stopped short.

Barney turned to his bookshelf. A whole two shelves lined with every single John Foster book. What a disaster that would have been! Quickly, he dropped to his knees to pull out the books and hide them in his lean-to. He stopped. No, they were staying. He'd never read them. A lovely row of brand new books. His wedding present to his new bride. She'd be delighted.

As he made up his bed with the new sheets and clean blanket, Barney smiled rye to himself. "Lavendar smells a bit better than sweaty, dirty woodsman."

As he walked from his bedroom to the veranda, he looked around the living room. That awful red sofa. "The Atrocity" as he'd named it. Maybe he could do something. Off the wall came the wolf skins. Much better.

Returning to the stove on the veranda, Barney carried his boiling water into the kitchen where he stripped and scrubbed himself down again. His freshly laundered clothes came on.

5:30. He should eat and leave. He should give himself extra time in case Lady Jane acted up again. He wasn't hungry for some reason, although he realized he hadn't eaten a single thing all day.

"Can blaze a lone trail in the Yukon unafeard, but have an attack of nerves over holding my new wife." He combed his hair again and left.

At 6:20, he could see Roaring Abel's house lights. What if she's not coming? What if after all this fuss, she's changed her mind? Barney felt a sting of rejection. What if - There she was. Barney shook his head. She was wearing her outlandish green dress that him think of dryads and sprites. Well, they were both of the woods so maybe their marriage would be a success, even if it wasn't going to last very - but he wouldn't think about it. He would make her happy. She was a sweet woman who probably would try to make him happy too even though he didn't need it.

Barney jumped out of the car and held the door for her. As she stepped into Lady Jane, Valancy looked back over her shoulder at him and smiled. He felt his breath catch. Was that really Valancy? She looked so, so. Maybe he would kiss her now. No, she'd never been kissed before. This was hardly special. He'd wait. Why had he been worrying? Life with her wasn't going to be bad at all.

Through the ride, Valancy was nearly silent. Barney understood her. She was nervous, unsure, maybe she didn't want to marry him now. As is she read his thoughts, she told him that she thought he'd changed his mind. He'd told her "no", but she seemed upset and sad by it. What was wrong with this woman?

Twice, he caught her looking at him so, well, clearly she did love him, but when he faced her, she seemed mysterious and out of reach. Maybe he didn't understand her as well as he thought. It was as though there were always a secret just below the surface.

Maybe he'd learn it tonight. Maybe he wouldn't. She knew that he didn't love her. She might want to wait to see if he could learn to care for her. He never would.

Barney had a sudden sense of panic wondering if she would hope for something she could never get. No, they wouldn't be married long. She was asking to let her love him for a short time and to pretend she had her dream come true - being the beloved wife of the man she loved. The sadness of it struck him. Even in her marriage, she was robbed of true happiness. What an unfair life this poor girl had! He realized he'd never heard her complain about a single thing. She seemed to find the best in things when she'd been unfairly, probably unnecessarily robbed of the most basic joys of life. He really had never met a woman like her.

He would make her happy and give her the dream as long as she, she needed him to. He would be a good, loving husband to her. He had no doubt that she would make an affectionate, sweet wife. She would have to share his bed with him. There wasn't anywhere else to sleep. If she wanted him to wait, well, he could do. Why would she want to? He had already decided that he wasn't waiting unless she wanted him to. How would he know? How could he ask her?

Barney looked over at Valancy again, looking her body over carefully, making sure she didn't notice. She was so petite, fragile, really half-starved. Didn't her people ever feed her? Maybe they should ask a doctor first. Maybe it would be too much for her. But then, why had she asked? Did she really understand what married couples did? She was no young girl. That was absurd.

Or had he completely misunderstood her?

Barney glanced over again at Valancy who seemed deep in thought. He looked at her dark red lips twisted in amusement, a laugh ready to come but didn't. She's very fair for having such dark eyes and hair. That really was his favorite combination in a woman. Her neck was - Where was his useful, distracting list? He would find a new thing to think about. What a fine spruce up ahead. A great towering one. Like a colossus. That would work well, "All the mystery of Greece...", wait, no. Had he used that before? Very tall, probably well over - I'm so short, insignificant looking. She's so small. Beautifully petite. Just the perfect size for me really. She'll fit so nicely into my arms. Exactly the right height to kiss her easily. I wonder how she'll look when I lean down to kiss her for the first - Maybe I can find another spruce worth looking at. Ah, there's one. A nice, fine old - What is she smiling about?

Valancy shifted in her seat to look at something, turning nearly entirely around as they past it. Her skirt raised higher, but she didn't notice. Barney did. He noticed her really beautiful ankles and such adorable, amazingly small feet. Her legs were so thin. Wasn't depriving her of all love, education, friendship, LIFE, bad enough? Did they have to starve her too?

Barney felt a rush of inner anger. Abel said she was the best money manager he'd ever had. That was fine and good. His royalties were plenty enough to live on. He hardly touched them. He appreciated good money management, but she was going to eat - real, filling meals. That would no doubt be good for her health.

The anger exploded into inner rage that consumed him. HER WEAK HEART! Why else would a young woman of her age have heart trouble? Had her family basically killed her?

Barney shot a glance at her as he angrily opened his mouth to demand he tell her if she'd been starved by her mother, but stopped. They were going to get married. She was smiling. Look at her eyes. They could discuss it later. Her skin really was amazingly smooth looking. Her arms and legs could be lovely if they were more filled out. There was nothing wrong with knowing your wife was going to become more attractive as time went by. He determined that under his care, she'd thrive. If she wanted to, he would take her along for some of his shorter rambles in the woods. The way she quoted his books! She'd probably enjoy it. Did they sell boots that small? She really did have beautiful ankles. Ankles? He'd never looked at a woman's feet before. Why was he fascinated by hers? What was she doing?

Valancy's tiny hands reached down to adjust her skirt. Barney felt decidedly annoyed. They were getting married. What did it matter if he admired her now or in two hours? If she had to move it, why not higher instead? His mind started to wander where it should not go.

Lady Jane nearly hit a rock on the side of the road. Barney quickly righted Lady Jane to the middle of his lane and apologized. His grip tightened on the wheel. He could see the lights of the Port up ahead. Trees. He would focus on trees.

"Where does Mr. Towers live?"

Valancy gave him the directions. Such as sweet, throaty voice. In only a few hours, she would tell him that she loved him in that voice in between her kisses. What else would she say? Would she want him to kiss her neck? There was a small little spot that looked so alluring. He could - Trees! Deciduous trees now that they were in town. An oak. Probably 300 years, maybe a little older. - 300. If it were days instead, that would be almost a year.

"I wonder how long we'll have. I hope she goes in her sleep, maybe while I'm holding her. I hope she won't have pain. I wonder how much she suffers or what we need to do. She never told me. She asked me not to think about it. I won't. We're here."

Barney opened Valancy's door and took her hand to help her out of Lady Jane. He was surprised by how warm it felt. So, she wasn't scared or nervous. She almost beamed at him. This woman really was overjoyed to be marrying him. A scruffy backwoodsman like him. It made no sense.

Barney watched Valancy all through the ceremony, but she seemed to not even be in the room. She mechanically answered the questions as someone who was reading the ceremony out of a book. Her mind seemed a million miles away. Before her vows, she looked in the mirror and almost laughed.

What was she doing?

Barney offered Valancy his arm and walked her back out to the car. Immense relief. It was over. Over the ride home, he did what Valancy wanted - to hear about her new life, his island, his cats,

everything.

But, nothing prepared him for her reaction when she saw the island. Was she really comparing his shack to the Blue Castle of her dreams? Was she mocking him? No, her eyes were shining. She was nearly overflowing with delight.

It wasn't that great. He was glad he'd painted the outhouse.

Barney helped Valancy out of the canoe and up onto the rocks. She stood rooted in place gazing adoringly at his house, their house. She seemed actually proud of it. Happy. Exuberant almost. With still shining eyes, she turned to him with a delighted smile and real tears of joy.

The night was lovely. She was so happy. They had arrived home. This was the right moment.

Barney enveloped her in his arms. She felt even smaller than she looked. Valancy smiled up at him. He kissed her, welcoming her home, the home she seemed so happy to be coming to. He felt her trembling, but he didn't stop. He was careful, tender, good to her. She hesitantly held onto his arms, still shaking, but he felt her lean towards him.

Barney's heart began to pound. She wanted him, wanted him to kiss her.

When he leaned back from her, she shyly looked down, but smiled. He put his arm around her and whispered, "Come see inside." He watched her quickly walk from room to room. She praised everything, thanked him for the new towels, seemed surprised he'd thought to bring in wood for her. She stopped with huge eyes and an open mouth before the bookcase. He knew that she'd love it.

Barney crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, waiting for her to recover. What was she doing? She was running towards him. Her arms were around his neck. Her wet cheek was on his. Was she crying? She was, thanking him over and over. He felt a little guilty, but she was so happy. She was saying he was so kind and generous to her, that she never imagined she'd ever own one of his books, but to own them all! Was that her laughing? He'd never heard her laugh like that. He'd better kiss her again. She would think it strange if he didn't. Was he imagining it, or had she kissed him back?

Where was she going? She disappeared outside to look at the hanging moon over the Lake. She ran back to him and pulled him down towards the canoe to see it, showing it to him as though he'd never seen it before. He saw her face in the moonlight, not at all pretty but alluring, enchanting almost. He really ought to kiss her one more time. He held her around the waist and rested his hand on the back of her head. He felt her shiver. As he kissed her more and more deeply, her arms slid up his back as she held onto his shoulders. He'd been right. She did fit perfectly in his arms.

After a long while, he whispered to her, "I made a mistake. We have to go back in the house." Barney kept his arm around her and started walking. She put her head down on his shoulder when he paused for a moment. He led her back to the front door before throwing her up into his arms and carrying her over the threshold. She cried out in alarm

then laughed. She clung to his shirt.

"Now, it's official. You are my own wife, Mrs. Snaith."

Before he could put her down, Valancy held his face in her tiny hands. He could feel her ring against his cheek. She gently kissed him and thanked him for marrying her. He found it moved him deeply, strangely thrilled him to be kissed like that. So this was what it was like to be kissed by a woman who truly loves you. Such intensity and devotion in that short little kiss from her very soul. How different from the rigid, polite kisses from - Valancy smiled at him. He'd kiss her back. He could feel her grip on his cheeks tighten as he kissed her with more intensity. She said over and over how happy she was, how glad to be his wife. He'd do it. Show her a little of how he was feeling. He'd know then if he should ask her. He leaned her back in his arms. She smiled at him. She seemed almost excited.

Excited? Who was he kidding? With his rough, small hands, small frame, unruly mop of hair. She probably didn't love him at all, didn't care. She only wanted a comfortable home. She must have figured out somehow despite all the stories, that he'd never been with a woman before, knew that was exactly how to convince him. Pretend she cared. Pretend she wanted him. Yet again, a woman had made a fool out of him, but now he was stuck, trapped with her. He knew what he would do, he'd - "Is something wrong, Barney?"

Barney's head jerked down to look at Valancy. Her dark eyes were filling with tears. Her whole shining, happy expression had faded back into her normal, quiet, old maidenish one. She slowly turned her head away.

"I see. I'm, I'm sorry." More tears that she was pretending weren't there. "Will you put me down, please? I'll get busy cleaning up. I'm sure you have things to do. Are you hungry? I saw you filled the larder. I can easily cook you some, some -" She covered her face and shook with crying. She whispered quietly, "I'll go home, to my mother's tomorrow. I'm sorry."

Barney felt surprised by how helpless her crying made him feel. He had done it. Wounded the poor girl to the heart. She hadn't had anything she should on her wedding day, and now, he'd made her weep with his stupidity.

"No, no. You won't." Barney forced her face to look into his.

"Barney, it's all right. If you have changed your mind now that you actually have me here with you, my uncle can consult an attorney. We can -"

"NO! Don't ever say that again." Without even thinking of what he was doing, he crushed her close to him and kissed her a little wildly. She was gasping and shivering between his kisses. He'd confess. He'd promised they'd never tell each other a lie. With a deep breath, Barney looked into her little unsure eyes. "Valancy, there's nothing wrong. I am only very nervous. I've, I've never held a woman like this before in my life. You are only the second woman I've ever kissed. And I've kissed you more than I had ever kissed her."

Valancy's face began to shine again. "Oh, Barney. I'm glad. I don't know why, but I am. But, there is no reason to be afraid with me. I think you the best man I've ever met. I respect you so much. Am so overwhelmingly, I'm so happy. And please know that I'm not nervous at all with you. I never will be afraid again. Not when I'm with you. I can't be. I know that I am safe with you. My whole life I've been nervous and afraid, but I'm not now." She gently wrapped her hands and arms around his neck. "I thought you regretted it. Didn't want me. Changed your mind. You seemed so upset. I'm sorry. I didn't understand you.

I'm happy. I'm so happy I can hardly believe it's real. I didn't know anyone could feel as happy as I do now. I feel as though this is a dream. The best dream in the world. Oh, Barney, I love you." Her hands and arms went back around his neck.

Barney kissed her, gently making her open her mouth. This time, he did not hold back. When they finally parted, their eyes met. His silent question was again asked and answered, answered with a blushing smile, a nod, and a mysterious gaze directly into his eyes.

Barney carried her into his room and closed the door.

Chapter 12

Barney eyes snapped open. Something was warm, soft, right next to him. He jerked with a start and sat up. Catching his laugh, Barney bent his knees and rested his arms on them still covered by his blankets.

Valancy was still sleeping. What time was it? The sun was fairly high in the sky. It must be at least 9. He'd hadn't slept that late for months. But, he had to confess to himself that he was in no rush to get up today. Carefully, he lay back down and turned onto his side. He gently put his arm around his wife's waist and cuddled up around her with his face resting in her roseys hair.

There was no doubt about it. Being married was the best life. And being married to a woman who loves you was the best thing on earth. Happily remembering that they were married now and such things were allowable, Barney indulged in remembering and mentally reliving his wedding night twice. He had also visited the outhouse, boiled water, washed up, brushed his teeth, shaved and climbed back into bed next to his wife. Of course, he had no particular motive for doing this. He just wanted to be clean and presentable when his wife woke up. And she would no doubt still want to be in his arms as they had fallen asleep so he hadn't seen the point of getting dressed.

Valancy made a cute little squeaky sound - rather like she made when he kissed her neck. He decided to try it to see if it really was the same.

Yep. Exactly the same.

Valancy blushed as she got out of bed before putting on her nightgown and excusing herself to go outside.

"What is taking so long?" Barney finally peeked out his door and saw

her washing up. Keeping well out of sight, Barney enjoyed this fringe benefit of being a married man. When she finished dressing again and brushing her teeth, Barney rushed back to bed and laid down.

Valancy annoying kept her nightgown on and gave him a sideways look.

"What?"

"I'm not blind, Barney."

"What?"

Valancy burst into laughter. "Next time find a better hiding spot. You have a mirror to reflect the heat on the range, remember? I could see you the whole time."

"And you didn't stop me?"

"Why would I? You're my husband now."

Barney felt the same rush of passion he'd experienced the night before. "Well, if that's the case, come here. I want to talk to you for a while."

"I know that one. You told me that last night. You didn't say a word."

"I promise."

Valancy startled him - just like she had the night before when after her initial shyness wore off, she had amazed him by being so open, tender and passionate with him. He had experienced true, deep love for the first time in his life. It had moved him to his soul. He couldn't believe he'd ever hesitated or wondered if he should get married. She grabbed his face and kissed him as deeply as she could.

Barney held her waist while her tiny fingers ran through his hair as she kissed him more and more passionately before sitting down on his lap as she gripped his shoulders and kissed him all over his face.

Valancy suddenly leaned back, held his cheeks and softly said, "Good Morning, Barney."

"No, it's a great morning. Let's make our morning last all day." Barney pushed her backwards and gave her the start of a kiss before suddenly jerking back from her. "I'm, I'm, I'm sorry."

"For what?" Valancy appeared sincerely confused.

Barney sat up and put his arms on his knees again, but this time he hung his head. "Valancy, I, I don't want to, to take advantage of our situation. For you to feel like, like, well, like I am taking advantage of you or your generosity with me. You were so good to me already, I mean, last night. I shouldn't be, be doing this now. I'm sorry."

She stared at him as though he had lost his mind. "Barney, I have no

idea what you mean. What are you saying?" She sat next to him and gently put her hand down on his thigh. His heart started pounding. "Do you mean that you don't want us to be lovers again?"

How can she handle this in such a straightforward way, like it's not odd?

"Do you mean, Barney, because you don't love me? You don't want to?"

Barney closed his eyes and whispered to her, "Of course, I want to. I'd like nothing better than to love you right this moment, but I want you to be happy, not regret or think that I only care about -"

Valancy finally understood. She jumped up onto her knees and seemed truly angry. "Is that what you think of me? That I would have such a low opinion of you? Why would I have risked being a fool, an object of ridicule if you had said 'no'? Because I think you would take advantage of me and mistreat me? I have the highest respect for you, Barney. I love you more than I can ever express. I want to, I mean, I delight in being your wife, in every way. You're not loving me doesn't make a difference. Just being able to show you how much I love you is enough for me. It's the greatest joy I know. Just to be here with you and to love you. Why would I think poorly of you?"

Barney's heart seemed to burn within him as he thought, "What have I done? Who have I married? What sort of an incredibly lucky fellow am I? I've never heard of any man being loved like this - and for no reason that makes sense, it's me." He met her eyes while quietly saying, "If you promise me that you will always keep our commitment to be honest and tell me if this starts to bother you or makes you uncomfortable or -"

"I promised already. That day will never come, but I promise again." She beamed a smile at him as her tiny fingers went back to playing with his hair. She softly kissed him. "Now, will you kiss me back or not?"

Barney did not need to be asked twice.

Neither of them left the room again until supper time.

As Valancy cooked flapjacks and bacon, Barney held onto her waist and kissed the back of her neck with an occasional answer as Valancy seemed to be trying to learn who their neighbors were. He began to feel annoyed. What was wrong with her? Finally, he shortly said, "I'm trying to focus and concentrate on your neck, Valancy. Will you please stop asking me questions?" For some reason, she found this amazingly funny and nearly doubled over laughing after apologizing.

Barney had never seen her like this - laughing, happy, smiling. He felt such a rush of - What was it? - gladness, he supposed you could call it. Just real happiness at seeing someone so delighted.

After they had been married for four days, Barney woke up and reached out for his wife. She wasn't there. Alarmed, he jumped out of bed, pulled on his overalls and ran out of their room. She wasn't in the

house. Dashing into the back, he found her hanging up the wash.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Housework."

"You did some already. The place is spotless. I have enough clothes. Why aren't you in bed?"

"Ooohhh. Is that the problem? I thought maybe you had some sort of problem with my doing the laundry and wanted me to hire a laundress. You got my hopes up."

Barney grinned at her. "Nope. I can do it though. I'll help."

"No, you will do whatever mysterious thing you do in your lean-to. You haven't done it yet so if you should be doing it, get to it. I'm going into Deerwood today."

"When should we leave?"

"We? No, I am going to Deerwood. You are working. I have to see my family alone."

"I can drive you."

"No, I'll walk. You showed me the shortcut into town. Jacques told me about it too. What is that face for?"

"Nothing. I don't want you to go alone. It's not safe."

Valancy erupted into laughter. "Yes, Deerwood is not safe - when I'm alone on an island with the only known criminal for miles."

Barney laughed harder than she had. "Fine. You win, but get home before dark. Okay?"

"I will."

Within the hour, Barney paddled her over to the other side of the lake. She disappeared into the trees.

As soon as she was gone, John Foster took up his place at his desk. Whistling, he got to work. Except he didn't. He had brought in his lunch that Valancy had made for him. He slowly smiled as he remembered their dinner the night before as he gently caressed and kissed her back and neck while she tried to cook. It really did bother her but she indulged him since he loved it. He had then sat her down on his lap while he read Byron's poems and Shakespeare's sonnets. Her mysterious slanted eyes narrowed at him with such an expression before she had said, "Is this supposed to melt my heart and make me throw myself at you?"

"Yes, it's a wonderful habit you have - throwing yourself at me. I am helping you to keep in practice. Let's try it." He'd opened his arms wide while she threw himself into a strong kiss as he wrapped her up tight.

Barney closed his eyes and happily remembered his night with his wife

in front of the big room's fire.

What time is it? Barney emerged from a long reminiscing over his whole four days of marital happiness to realize there were afternoon shadows. Valancy should be back soon.

Without having written one word, Barney left his lean-to and sat down on the pier, positive that Valancy would appear any minute. After waiting pointless for thirty-five minutes, he had gone back to work, but instead stewed in his lean-to. He was livid, absolutely furious. He was worried to distraction. Suppose her family had talked her into staying with them. Suppose they'd lied to her about his supposed criminal record and fabricated something. Suppose once she saw 'real life' in Deerwood, she decided that's what she wanted after all.

Wait. She was back. He could hear her in the house.

Back to pack up probably.

Chapter 13

Barney moved some things around, pretending like he had been working, got control of himself and assumed a nonchalant manner as he walked into the kitchen. He watched a bemused, smiling Valancy get their supper together.

"How did you get back to the island?"

"Abel. I stopped by to tell him too. He was going fishing and dropped me off."

"I would have come to get you."

"I know. I would have yelled as we discussed. How was your day?"

"I had a good dayâ€|.until the end."

After a few minutes of silence, Barney asked, "Are you going to tell me what's so funny?"

Valancy's eyes danced with mischief. "I learned today that I didn't have to propose to you after all."

Barney said nothing but waited as he filled his pipe.

"Edward Beck consulted my family about marrying me."

Valancy laughed again as she finished clearing the table.

Barney lit his pipe. He started smoking. "And how would you have liked being Mrs. Beck?"

"Busy. 9 children. A 48 year old husband. All my relatives constantly in and out of the house to give me advice. When they found out I was married, they were quite put out. Edward Beck has twenty thousand dollars and the biggest house on the Port Lawrence road. I don't know what was worse - that I was Mrs. Snaith or that I would never be Mrs. Beck."

Barney had an amused expression pass over his face as he curiously waited to hear the rest. He was suddenly feeling much, much better. Relieved.

Valancy smiled villainously at him and repeated her remarks about rather being in her husband's arms over having Edward Beck's money and her clan's shocked reaction. Barney smiled at her across the table. Valancy continued talking about the rest of her day, ending with how she only wanted to come home and how happy she was to be back.

As Valancy walked past him to retrieve her John Foster book from its perch, Barney pulled her down onto his lap. Valancy leaned back as Barney rested his chin on her head. Valancy whispered to him, "Oh, Barney. I just glory in the feel of your arms and the beat of your heart. Barney kept silently smoking with only an occasional quiet remark.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine. Let's go to bed."

Valancy looked at him curiously. "Are you angry, Barney?"

"No."

Barney climbed into bed after taking off his clothes. Valancy put on her nightgown. It annoyed him. She then did the strangest thing. She turned away from him and calmly said, "Goodnight".

"What are you doing?"

"Going to sleep."

Barney testily interrogated her. "What's wrong with me today? You don't want me to go with you to Deerwood. You don't want me to drive you. You come home late. You won't sleep on my chest like you always do. You probably didn't want to sit on my lap and were just humoring me. What's the problem?" He moodily glared at her.

Valancy bit back a smile. "You have been a bear all evening. I thought I'd give you some space and try again tomorrow. Obviously, I upset you today. I am sorry, Barney, but I did really have to see my family alone. There is nothing wrong with you."

Barney looked at her steadily. "Well, all right."

Barney lay down in silence for a few minutes.

"Barney?"

"What?"

"I didn't know you were a quitter."

"What do you mean?"

"Is that all the effort you are going to make? If you want me, come get me."

Barney surprised himself and Valancy by leaping across the bed, seizing her by the shoulders and rather ravenously kissing her.

When Valancy could talk she gasped out, "BARNEY!"

"Stop talking."

Chapter 14

THE REST IS HOLD -

"I can't work any more today, Moonlight. It's too hot. What do you say we go for a swim?"

Valancy appeared worried.

"Let me guess. Your family also wouldn't let you learn how to swim." Barney tried to keep the angry, impatient tone out of his voice that he knew he always had when talking about his wife's family. She lived in the Muskoka _and didn't know how to swim_. He hated how snubbed, cowed, and unloved she had been. He had suffered at the hands of strangers - stupid bullies, but her own mother. He pushed it from his mind and kept talking. "That means you need lessons. Let's go to the Port to get you a swimming suit. I could use a new one too. Once we are properly clothed, we can go swimming."

"It's already 10:30. Should we have lunch and then go?"

"No, I'll take you out."

"But, it will cost—" Valancy stopped. Barney didn't know it, but he always got a rather impatient look on his face when she talked about money. "If you are sure the budget can swing it, I would love to."

"Good. Get your hat. This sun is beastly. I don't want you with another headache like Monday."

"Of course, I'll be right back." Valancy flashed an excited smile at him and took off at a run towards the house. Mid-stride, her whole body went limp. She fell to the ground - lifeless. She lay face down in the dirt.

Barney's heart felt as though it too had ceased to beat. Agony. Regret. Fury. Why, why, why hadn't he gotten it for her? Why did he let her run? Without realizing he had even moved, he was at her side, rolling her over, taking her into his arms.

Valancy was ashen, white. She was clutching her chest, gasping for breath.

Barney tore off to the house. He wrenched the medicine bottle off the mantle and dashed back to her. Wiping his tearful eyes, he managed with shaking hands to drip some into her mouth. He had to open and close her mouth for her. Her eyes seemed to be staring but not seeing.

Barney wrapped her up in his arms, whispering to her, gently kissing her face, her hair. He felt her small hands enclose on his arms,

holding onto him for comfort or support, he didn't know which and didn't care. Valancy hadn't died this time.

Barney kept one arm around her with her limp face grasped in his other hand. He smiled down at her half opened eyes. "You can't go around falling down like that. Look. You uprooted that perfectly good rock. See all the ants? You destroyed part of their hill. They will have to spend days redoing your damage." An almost smile appeared on his wife's face.

Barney lifted her up into his arms. He carried her and her hated medicine into the house. After setting her down on the sofa, he handed her a John Foster book. She couldn't grasp it. He laid it down on the blanket that he had brought to cover her as she felt much too cold, especially for such a hot day. As he quickly cut an apple into tiny pieces, he saw her staring at nothing with the book remaining on her lap untouched. He kept wiping his eyes, denying to himself that he was crying.

After several deep breaths, he walked back to her, smiled, and casually talked to her. He helped her to drink some water and eat a small bit of the fruit. It was too exhausting for her. She closed her eyes and fell asleep. Barney gently stroked her hand and sat next to her nearly the whole time. He was not a praying man, but in those few moments, he put what he had learned from his Free Methodist preacher to good use and "came boldly before the throne of grace" to plead for his wife. Barney dropped to his knees and gently leaned part of his head on his wife's chest, listening to the rapid, much too rapid beat of her heart. He softly wrapped his arms around her.

"Just give her to me for a little longer. I promise I'll be more careful, more caring. I'll think more about what I'm doing and the consequences for her. She's carried water buckets to wash all week. I always do it, but I got lazy. I saw how she was sweating, but I had a thought and wanted to get it down - as though my writing is more important than she is. That's probably what did it. Have mercy. I forgot that we're pretending she's not sick. She seems fine so much of the time. Please, please don't take her away from me yet. Let me make it up to her. Oh, God, I've grown so fond of her. I'll never love her, but she's the only real friend I've ever had. Please, please don't make me be alone again. Not yet. She's happy with me. I promise I'll work harder on making her happier. I'll stop being selfish. When I complained about her not having supper ready, after all those years of nothing, I really hurt her with my ingratitude. I complained that it was cold and was grumpy because I don't really like potato soup. She'd never made it before. Yet, I hadn't thanked her so many times when she did cook for me. I know how much she likes to see that she's made me happy. My complaining really hurts her, but I didn't even care. And, then, then, I barked at her moodily over nothing, but when we went to bed, her arms were wide open just like always. Still I didn't say I was sorry."

Barney's voice dropped to a whisper. "All my wonderful nights with her. And, and all the other times. When she's been so generous with me. So tender and loving. Telling me that her loving me was enough, that it was a gift I could give to her, to let her express her love for me - when it's the greatest joy of my life. I wish I could give such love back to her, but I can't. Yet, she says she's happy for our times together, telling me it makes her love complete. I don't understand such unconditional love that she gives me. I've never felt

so respected in my whole life. To see the pride on her face and in her voice when she introduces me as her husband - when she has thinks me an eccentric, poor, shabby vagabond. What other man on earth is esteemed like I am? Please, please, don't take it away from me yet. I can't stand the thought."

Barney fully broke down crying and raised his head looking down into Valancy's sleeping face. "I have been taking her for granted. I never apologized about the supper. I haven't done things for her like I should. I could easily make her life not so hard, but I'm so worried what she'll do if she finds out. I'll figure out a way. Come up with a true way of telling her that I have some money and buy a few things to make her life easier. Extra linens to cut down her washing. More pillows to make our bed more comfortable for her. Please let me tell her that I'm sorry, that I will help her more, that I'll - **GET OFF HER!**"

Barney angrily swatted at the fly that kept landing on Valancy's face. He did not want it landing, crawling on his wife's face. The disrespect. Like a sign of abject poverty - or death. He made a frustrated roar when it landed on her cheek and crawled down towards her mouth. An irrational rage filled him - not her mouth - her sweet, delicious mouth that he'd kissed every day. Forgetting to let her sleep, he voraciously kissed her, choking out how much he cared for her as his very best friend, begging her to not leave him yet.

As Valancy started to move, Barney immediately relaxed back to his usual aloof self and casually smiled down at her. Her eyes blinked open. She smiled at him and stretched. "Yes? Did I oversleep?" She looked down at the book on her lap and laughed. "I must have been really tired. I don't even remember coming in to read. Are we still going?"

Barney felt a little sick. It'd happened again. The attack was so bad that she didn't remember it. Cautiously, he talked to see how much she remembered. "Yes, if you remember you were going to come in to get your hat. I guess you wanted a book and a nap instead. Or were you teasing me about wanting to learn to swim and didn't want to tell me you weren't interested?"

Valancy blushed. "I am sorry. I must have gotten distracted. Yes, I want to so much. I'll get my hat and -"

"No." Barney's voice was quiet but firm.

Valancy stared at him.

"I will get it for you. You wait here." Barney got her hat and stuck it on her head - backwards. Valancy laughed, fixed it and moved to stand up. "Stop! You get the special treatment today. I'm carrying you. STOP! Why are you taking off your blanket?"

"Barney! I can walk fine! And it's hot! I'm surprised I'm not sweating already." Valancy laughed as Barney lifted her into the air and asked when he finally gave a pause between his kisses, "What is the matter with you today?" as he carried her all the way to the disappearing propellor boat.

At the Port, Barney shamelessly kept one arm around his wife's waist everywhere they went. Seeing the shocked expressions on the old

ladies' faces was source of great amusement to him.

Valancy seemed delighted about it. She looked up at him, met his eyes, and turned away from him. It was a little game between them. Valancy wanted to be kissed, but knew that she couldn't be at that moment. They often did it in church.

Barney smiled to himself as he thought, "You're not getting away with it today." He called her name. As she turned to face him with a "Yes?", he pulled her close to him - and kissed her.

**"DOSS!_*_*

Barney pulled her tighter to his chest and kissed her much longer than he planned to. Valancy winked at him and smiled when they parted. After Barney kissed her forehead, they turned to see some of Valancy's relatives. They all looked rather shocked. Barney felt his wife start to cower a little bit before she took a deep breath and relaxed into his side. Barney held her possessively and took over the talking.

"I am delighted to see you, Aunt Wellington, Cousin Olive, Mr. Price. And what brings you out on this hot day?"

"We were visiting Mr. Price's family and now returning home. If you will excuse us, we-"

"Of course, of course, but I must say, Aunt, that your hat is really so becoming to your charming face. I can easily see where Cousin Olive got her beauty. I have had so few opportunities to converse with you that I never noticed how much beauty ran in the family. I can easily see why such a fine man as my wife's Uncle Wellington has been so happily married all these years."

Aunt Wellington was flattered into silence. Barney continued by so politely adjusting Olive's parasol, reminding her that she must mind her "only one true asset, a lovely peaches and cream complexion" before shaking hands with Cecil congratulating him on his engagement to the most beautiful girl in the county. Barney returned to holding Valancy as he kept talking. "I never lie to Valancy and tell her that she is beautiful because she isn't, but we are both lucky fellows. You got the girl with the beauty. I got the girl with the mystery, fascination, wit and intelligence. And we both know which lasts longest. Yes, we were both very wise to have chosen Stirling women."

Barney could feel Valancy's stomach shaking. She was laughing and trying to contain it. Cecil and Olive were both looking so pleased. Valancy looked up into his face and smiled as her eyes twinkled at him. He gently kissed her head. "Valancy, do have a nice chat with the ladies while I get to know my future - well, whatever relation Mr. Price will be. I know we can ask your mother who will have it all figured out by now."

A much braver Valancy started talking to Olive and her aunt.

"Doss, I am surprised at your husband. I had no idea he was so well-spoken and gracious. I would not have expected it from, well, from a man who lives as he does."

"Barney is an extremely well-educated man. I believe that there is not a subject on earth that he does not know something about. Barney chooses to live as he does because he loves the forest and wild places, not out of necessity. He has traveled extensively as well. Thank you, Aunt, for your kindness. And how are all the family?"

Aunt Wellington talked over the clan gossip while Olive's frown grew wider and deeper. She and Valancy could both hear Valancy's disreputable, "criminal" husband talking circles around respectable Cecil and correcting his ideas and opinions. Barney was in point of fact making a complete fool out of him while not in the least trying to, but sincerely was trying to get to know him.

Valancy and Olive could both hear Barney's praise of her to Cecil, "Such an excellent manager! I tell you, Price, it makes such a difference when you can hand over a sum of money that you expect to last a week and find it lasted her nearly three. It gets to the point sometimes that I have to tell Valancy to buy something when she's making due. That's one of the reasons we are here today. I am sure you know exactly what I mean. Just looking at Cousin Olive I can tell that she and money are a perfect pair."

Cecil's eyebrow's furrowed as he replied that they would be married as soon as he could afford to keep Olive in the style to which she was accustomed.

Barney gently shook Cecil's shoulder in an understanding, almost sympathetic way. "Well, now, Price, that is generous of you. My Valancy would never allow me to do such a thing. My wife couldn't bear the thought of not starting our life together immediately and accepted me as I stood. Do you know - She has such a sense of humor. - that she told me that she would marry me in my dirty overalls, unshaved, unwashed, and smelling of mud and fish?"

Barney laughed good-naturedly while Cecil's brow further contracted looking almost as though someone had driven a plow through it for spring planting. He stole a look over at Olive who had turned a slight shade of magenta and was tapping her foot in annoyance.

Barney kept talking. "Speaking of money, Valancy is so generous to our neighbors that she's nearly the next Florence Nightingale. Old Mrs. Stimpet had the flu last month. Valancy took her a part of every one of our meals, often tidying up her little house and being a companion for her the whole afternoon until her family were able to come from Montreal to fetch her. She once spent the whole day with her except to come home to cook dinner for me. I protested, of course, that I could fend for myself for one day, but she told me, 'My first responsibility is to you, Barney. I couldn't be comfortable helping someone else and knowing that I had left you without a meal at home.' Mrs. Stimpet refused to leave her Up Back house for years, but the family finally were able to convince her after that illness. Valancy packed the entire house and made them take all her furniture and precious things, insisting that it was the right thing to do and beneficial to Mrs. Stimpet to be surrounded by her own things in her new home with her grown son, wife and their three children. Mrs. Stimpet sent me a note calling her 'a true Christian, an angel'."

Cecil seemed to try to think of something virtuous that Olive had done, but couldn't.

Barney concluded with a lower tone that was still perfectly audible, "And man to man, Cecil, I must say that there is nothing quite so wonderful as a truly loving, affectionate wife. Never a headache or a fake illness or a hint of tiredness at our house. To have a wife whose arms are always open to you, well, I never knew what a difference it would make. After a long day's work, a hearty meal, and a pleasant chat at the fireside with your own adoring wife sitting on your lap comforting you after all your labors, there is nothing like ending every day with a lovely smile and an embrace from a woman who loves you. It makes a house a home, I say. Plenty of fellows marry great beauties only to discover they've married icebergs, but I am so glad that won't be your fate and certainly wasn't mine. I'm sure that your girl is always very affectionate with you - not that I am implying anything inappropriate! No, no, I simply remember the delights of being engaged to Valancy. The only things sweeter than that first kiss is the happiness of her kissing you out of a heart of love for the first time, but I'm sure you know exactly what I mean."

Cecil no longer looked worried. He appeared seriously concerned. Olive's face couldn't be a deeper shade of red. Cecil seemed to be remembering something - quite possibly exactly what Olive was remembering too.

Valancy's head raised a little higher as she felt her confidence climbing - and conquered her desire to laugh out loud over "the delights of being engaged to Valancy" when they hadn't even seen each other before the wedding, a whole 22 hours after the proposal and hadn't shared a kiss until they were married. She'd never been so unabashed by Olive in public before. Being brave in private on the Muskoka Road was one thing, but in the middle of Port Lawrence was another.

Finally, Aunt Wellington stopped talking clan gossip with no one having listened to a word she said. "And what brings you to the Port today, Doss?"

Barney turned from Cecil with a devilish gleam in his eyes. "I am taking Valancy shopping for new clothes."

Both Aunt Wellington and Olive appeared puzzled before Olive who was truly humiliated vindictively jabbed, "Yes, she has always needed help dressing. I can't think of a time in her life when Doss was properly dressed for anything. I have no doubt that even a man can dress her better than she dresses herself."

Valancy's head dropped. Olive smiled as she had triumphed over the cousin whose husband had decimated her fiancÃ© and called out her cold treatment of him. She vividly recalled that just last night, she had refused to sit outside with Cecil when all he wanted was a few kisses. Cecil's face showed that he clearly remembered it too.

Barney immediately perceived the slight to his wife, but kept grinning happily. His manner became, if possible, even more polite, polished and genteel. He hadn't been raised in Montreal society for

nothing.

"I agree. Valancy does need help. I find it a wonder that neither you nor your mother could ever be bothered to assist her, but then there so many things that Valancy needed such as actual meals. She was half-starved when we were married. I have discovered despite Valancy's family loyalty that it was intentionally done. Her mother and our Cousin Stickles really did the most alarming things to the poor child such as denying her proper clothes, fabricating tales to scare her half out of her wits, refusing her the most basic of play things even when they could easily be had, refusing to allow her to decorate her room according to own wishes, and constantly berating her about her looks - hardly surprising as they refused to properly feed her.

I find it a surprising thing that a family so respectable as the Stirlings would allow such goings-on in their family. More so that none of the men in the family stepped in to save the poor child. No doubt they trusted that Valancy's mother's behavior would change when she remarried, but of course, she never did so her mistreatment continued for my wife's entire life.

Is it any wonder she fled to me, her only true friend, to save her? I confess I was at a loss to understand why so fine a woman and a Stirling at that, would have any desire to marry a rough backwoodsman like me. However, as I reflected on the matter, I realized that, outside of her great love for me, it makes perfect sense because I treated her with a respect and kindness that she found from no one else, no, not even a single person in her family. I understand there are those in the family who disapprove our marriage. I really cannot understand that, unless they approved of Valancy's shocking mistreatment, but that of course could never be. No, no, I assume that the Stirlings were simply in ignorance of it. Surprising, I must say, in such a gossipy group.

I also understand that she was promised so many things that she never received and what she did have - she related an incident once about some beads during your school years - were taken away from her in this incident by both you, Cousin Olive and your mother. I imagine you also could have easily shared some outgrown clothes. Cousin Olive is so much taller and larger than my wife, could they not have been easily cut down or whatever it's called or remade into another dress for my wife? Ladies are forever redoing hats, are they not? Yet, not once was this ever done. Truly, I don't understand it. My opinion of my new family has never been quite so high as it once was, but no doubt you and your mother have since learned charity and kindness.

Else, I am concerned for you, Mr. Price. If your future wife would so callously treat her own cousin, how will she treat your children? Yes, I am certain it will never happen again. I am sure that my wife will only be treated with the utmost respect moving forward. If she is not, well, I have been brought up to think very differently and will not stand idly by and allow it to happen as it seems the Stirling men have chosen to do.

Since my wife was never given what she should have had, I have been busily correcting her backward, misguided upbringing. Now, that she's eating properly, her health has decidedly improved. She has whatever she needs to run our household and manages excellently. She is a

shrewd and careful money manager in addition to being a most excellent cook. She sees to my every comfort and really has become indispensable to my life. I hold her in the highest respect.

We will be stopping at the bookstore while we are here. I cannot keep her in books. She is a voracious reader. She is making up for her poor education while I am making another set of bookshelves to hold all her beloved volumes.

Today, we are taking another step forward. She has already bought herself a few new dresses, but we came into the Port so that I may have the joy of buying her a swimming costume to teach her how to swim. I must hurry if I am to have such a joy. Else, she will no doubt teach herself. She has learned how to handle two different types of boats, botany, wilderness survival - so essential when living next to the deep Canadian wilds - and several other natural science disciplines. Really, she is an astonishing woman. I cannot tell you how delighted I am that she asked me to marry her. I daily regret that I did not think of it first, but again, she is my superior in so many ways - good sense being among them - that it does not surprise me that she realized before I did what perfect companions we would make each other. I assure you I am greatly envied Up Back for my 'Stirling' wife." Barney smiled over his little pun while Cecil studied the ground.

Displeased Olive decided to try to discomfort Valancy again by outlining all her wedding plans. As she talked, she and everyone else noticed Barney who had glanced at Valancy while listening to Olive, but was now staring at her with a look of intensity. Olive's proud words died away slowly.

Valancy seemed embarrassed as she looked at him, looked away and turned back to face him. Barney gave a low laugh as he walked over to her and held her face, "Hinting again, Darling? Why don't you just ask me? You know how much I love to kiss you." Barney stunned every Stirling and Price and passerby, his wife included, by romantically sweeping her into his arms, looking deeply into her eyes, and saying, "Valancy, you are the delight of my life." before openly kissing her adoringly. Valancy nearly burst with contained laughter and did everything she could to look perfectly normal as he pulled back from her and rested his forehead on hers.

Barney gently held her face and kissed her several times more times murmuring about his great passion for her. He glanced up and acted as though surprised, "AH! Do forgive me! I was so enchanted I had neglected to recall that we are not at home. My sweet girl is so delightful and charming that I tend to forget myself. When I see her smiling at me, I can think of nothing else except my wonderful Valancy, the best, most affectionate and dearest little wife on earth. What were we talking about? Oh, yes! Happy marriage. Congratulations again, Mr. Price, Cousin Olive. No doubt you will be in our position soon."

Barney shook hands with Cecil. He continued playing his role as he shocked Olive and Aunt Wellington by kissing their extended hands instead of shaking them as they intended him to do before turning to Valancy with tender eyes and sighing deeply as he wrapped his arm around her waist as if taking up his usual walking position.

"Again, I am sorry that we have delayed you so much. Oh! And one more

thing. There seems to be some confusion as to my wife's name. Her name is Valancy. You will call her it in future, I am sure. After all her family has done to her and allowed to be done, the least, the very least, they can do is to remember what her Christian name is.

Good day to you, Aunt, Cousin, Mr. Price. Come along, my sweet little Valancy."

With the picture-perfect adoring, firm husbandly look and stride, Barney swept her away. As they past Cecil who stood slightly away from the ladies, Barney audibly whispered, "I'm sure you are as eager to get back home as I am." Valancy wickedly replied, "Always, Barney. You know how I love you." Cecil looked crushed. Open-mouthed Aunt Wellington stood rooted in place. Shamefaced Olive couldn't meet her now angry fiancÃ©'s eyes.

The last thing Barney and Valancy heard was Cecil's hard voice saying, "I would be obliged, Miss Stirling, if you would explain yourself. Your cousin's husband is a reasonable, educated man. I do not think he would fabricate such stories. Moreover, I believe we should discuss what occurred or should I say failed to occur last evening."

Valancy looked up at Barney's self-satisfied face. He smiled down at her.

"You are a beast, Barney Snaith! How smoothly you destroyed them! And where did you learn manners like that?!"

"I learned from masters. Now, let's get some lunch. I've starved."

Barney bought her a picnic lunch and ice tea which they ate under a shady tree. She sat with her back against the trunk while Barney stretched out on the ground next to her. She smiled at him almost the whole time.

"Are you happy, Valancy?"

"Yes, of course. I'm always happy when we are together, Barney."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean at home, being married. Is it what you expected?"

Valancy's eyes seemed to shine. She grabbed out for his hands. "Oh, BARNEY! I'm so happy. I never thought I could be so happy. My life has been wonderful. I can never thank you enough for what you've done for me."

Barney smiled at her and felt glad. He really hadn't had to try very hard to make her happy at all. Valancy had enjoyed everything, appreciated everything - no matter how small. Sometimes just seeing her laughing at Good Luck and Banjo made him feel glad that they were married. She so deserved some happiness in her miserable life.

Barney decided he was going to make her very happy - and a little guiltily admitted that he was going to make himself happy too. "Come

on. Let's get shopping. I know exactly what we should get you, Moonlight."

Barney popped Valancy to her feet and pulled her close to his side. He kissed her hair and walked slowly with her to the bookstore. He ordered her to buy 10 new books and purchased her a pictorial atlas and a travel book before they headed to the Port's department store.

Over her objections, he insisted she buy two new tablecloths and several more pillows before he walked with her as far as he was allowed to go into the women's clothing department.

By now, Valancy was openly worried. Barney quietly assured her that he could afford it with "I am a saving man, Valancy. I want you to buy these things. If we couldn't afford it, I wouldn't do it."

Barney greeted the Women's Department sales lady and asked for a pencil. He wrote down a list of things. Valancy sat down in a waiting area with several men of assorted ages who were waiting for their wives. Barney looked decidedly out of place in his homespun shirt and overalls.

The sales lady, Barney's list and Valancy disappeared behind a large curtain.

Valancy came back in 30 minutes. From her face, Barney could tell that the clothes had been exactly what he wanted. He grinned at her. "Well, what did you think?"

"BARNEY SNAITH!" The assorted men looked up at the aghast wife with the flashing eyes. "Do you have any IDEA-"

"Of course, why else would I be willing to drop good money for them? Did everything fit?"

"Perfectly, sir. Your wife looked charming."

"We'll take them all."

"BARNEY! PLEASE!" Valancy approached mortification. The assorted husbands were now more than interested. Several appeared fascinated. "Barney, you can't know, have any idea-" Valancy stopped short. She looked at other men, turned almost magenta, but pleaded with her husband to no avail.

Barney smiled at her. "I can only imagine it now. You can show me when we get home. My dear, simply because we live Up Back on an island does not mean that you cannot have nice or beautiful things. Do you object to looking delightful?"

"You listen to me! I will never - WAIT." Valancy narrowed her eyes and stomped her foot at him. "And you will tell me RIGHT NOW, Mister Barney Snaith, just HOW do you have any idea -"

Barney and the other younger men exploded into laughter while the older men gave her strongly disapproving stares with the notable exception of a man around 55 who observed the whole scene with the greatest amusement on his face and a thoughtful twinkle in his

eye.

Barney enjoyed his wife's agony and did not mean to yield this point so matter how much she argued. "Valancy, I do read newspapers and magazines. They have advertisements. I did wonder if you had ever seen them, though. I have also walked by French and Spanish shop windows. They have a courage that Canadian stores, frankly, do not in showing off what may be purchased within.

I am helping you. You will be glad for the change. Don't worry. We will get you something warmer in the winter."

"Barney, I told you that I will buy all my own clothes. There is no need -"

"But, do these count as clothes? If so, that is not what I asked the young woman to show you."

Another uproarious outburst from the young men.

Valancy's mouth opened, but nothing came out.

The sales lady who worked on commission was not about to lose this week's groceries due to the prudish wife of a man so obviously ready to drop a good sum of money. Valancy's eyes actually got wider when she calmly announced to the room of men that they had a new style of sheer stockings with satin garters and nightgowns that were entirely made of lace. This time the whole room went silent as the men seemed to be considering this.

Barney spoke up first. "That is the most excellent news I've heard since I discovered my lady wanted to marry me. Wonderful. Go to it, Moonlight. I'll wait here. Blue preferably."

"We have cream with pink only, sir."

Barney smirked. "I believe I can make do with it."

Valancy was politely directed back into the dressing area from where Barney could clearly hear, "No! No! I'm not!" and after a pause, "OH! How beautiful!"

A hugely grinning Barney read a magazine and chatted current events with another man on his side of forty who had also sent new directions back to his wife. He informed Barney, "I rarely tell her what to do, but she's not telling me 'no' today. Cream with pink." Barney jotted him a note on what else his wife was getting today. The note went back to Mrs. Frederickson with an added scribble of "Consult Mrs. Snaith. You are both buying the following items today." who sent a reply of "Not on your life!" After showing it to a laughing Barney, Mr. Frederickson replied, "That wasn't a question. Hurry Up."

The sales lady invited Barney (and not Valancy) to come see her selections that had fit Valancy, although she was honest enough to admit that Valancy had declared that she would never wear them again except for the stockings and the nightgown. Barney checked all the prices, negotiated her down a bit, and paid for everything. Valancy sat amid a stack of boxes as Barney hurried off to Men's Wear, bought a bathing costume and returned in five minutes.

Mrs. Frederickson came out shortly after Barney returned and shared a smile with Valancy. Emma whispered to Valancy who nodded. Both ladies blushed. The husbands smiled at their ladies and walked out together. After making plans for tea at the Frederickson's the following week, smiling Valancy tried to help carry the stack of boxes, but Barney refused. Instead, he made three trips back and forth to the boat.

Veronica of Westermore's Ladies Wear went home rejoicing after her banner day of sales. Her favorite part of the day had been bringing the banker's wife Mrs. Roberts, her husband's selections. The bewildered woman of about 50 appealed to her saying, "He's never done such a thing before. How did he even think of this?" before she squealed horrified at the sight of her new nightgown. In addition to her husband's unmentionable selections, she acquired three new day dresses and two dinner gowns all in the new style of an open neck and bare arms. After she positively refused to wear them, a lovely new diamond necklace was sent back to her in the dressing room with a note reading, "Indulge me with the clothes. I will indulge you with the diamonds."

Mr. Roberts needed four boys to carry everything to his automobile and happily paid a princely sum for his wife's new wardrobe. Mrs. Roberts had changed into her husband's favorite dress and her new necklace while still in the store. She stepped into the motor car blushing like a girl of 18 as a delighted Mr. Roberts sat down next to her. Veronica heard him say before they drove off. "You look as lovely as the day we met, Elizabeth. Why have you been hiding in those awful old lady dresses? Shall we go out to a restaurant for dinner so that I may show you off?"

Valancy hardly said a word all the way home and averted her eyes whenever she saw the boxes. Barney smiled to himself and kept steering towards home.

When they got back, Barney helped Valancy out of the boat before carrying in his load.

"Don't! Barney, PLEASE!"

"Don't what?"

"Please stop whistling! I'll wear them if you want me to, but—" She covered her face as she burned red.

"What happened to my brave girl who spurns her family, proposes to the man she loves, runs off to live on an island, faces down impending-?" Barney stopped short.

Valancy didn't seem to notice his awkward silence. "THAT was nothing compared to today. Give me my bathing costume and go change into yours. Swimming had better be worth all this trouble."

Barney stood next to the fireplace and turned when he heard the bedroom door open. Valancy walked out in a very short, skimpy, lacey, beribboned, and adorable green swimming suit with a matching little robe and a tam-like swimming cap, rakishly pulled down over one ear. She opened her mouth to say something, but got a deep, enthusiastic kiss from her husband instead. Barney whispered to her when he

finally stopped kissing her, "Perfect. You look adorable. We could always go swimming tomorrow. You've had a very hard day." Valancy raised her eyebrows, evaded his arms and ran down to the water.

Barney began to teach her how to hold her breath. Every time she came up for air, he kissed her. After practicing three times, Barney told her that he had something else to show her. Curious, she followed him out of the water. Barney suddenly laid her down in the shade of their largest pine out of view of the passing boaters, held her face and thanked her for agreeing to buy her new clothes for the next 15 minutes until she ran back into the Lake.

Barney chased and caught her. Valancy looked up at him and smiled. Barney smiled down at her. She was saying something, but he didn't hear her. Valancy had stopped talking and looked at him puzzled. "What is it? You aren't listening to me. I said, 'I think I've learned holding my breath now. Will you teach me how to move my arms?'"

Barney lifted his wife's arms up into the air, leaned down and wrapped them around his neck before he held the back of her head and kissed her strongly. His heart began to beat harder as he felt his wife cling to him. Barney and Valancy stood in the water together for several minutes until college students in a disappearing propellor boat yelled and hooted at them. Valancy pulled back from him, blushing and nervous at having been seen. Barney felt decidedly annoyed until he had an inspiration. "Valancy, I think that waiting until later this evening, a night swim, will be more private and make you more comfortable. How about we go back to the house for the rest of the afternoon and continue our swim after dinner?" Valancy's rye smile showed that he had not fooled her one bit, but he was delighted when she smiled and agreed.

Barney took three weeks to teach Valancy how to swim.

Valancy learned to like her new clothes in only a few days. Barney was so admiring and enthusiastic about them. He started working fewer and fewer hours. He stopped taking so many walks in the woods alone and brought her along almost every time. One night, they even slept together under the stars and the streaking Milky Way. As Valancy fell asleep in his arms, Barney silently prayed and thanked God for giving him more time.

As he looked down at Valancy's peaceful, relaxed face, Barney added, "At times like this, I just can't believe she's even sick. She's the only true friend I've ever had. I don't ever want to give this up. Oh, God, why can't we stay here together forever?"

As Barney steered his canoe back to his pier, he gave his signal whistle to Valancy. His wife appeared in her blue dress, breaking out into a run down to him.

Barney caught her up into his arms before he kissed her. "Well, Moonlight, is my supper ready? I'm starved."

"Of course."

"Oh, can you carry this for me?"

Barney handed her his 'load' - the newest John Foster book. Valancy gave a scream of delight and covered him with kisses between her repeated thanks. She chattered away happily, reading him the dust cover excitedly telling him all about the joys within the pages. He rolled his eyes and told her that he wasn't listening.

Valancy grabbed his arm excitedly. "Guess what?!"

"If it's about John Foster, I'm not guessing. And I don't want to know."

"John Foster got married."

"Are you now social acquaintances with him too? Why didn't he send you a signed copy of his book? Or invite us to the wedding? Or did you go and not tell me to spare my jealousy?"

Valancy blushed and looked abashed. "Oh, Barney! What a thought! YOU jealous!" she blushed and shook her head. "You would never even notice."

Barney stopped taking off his boots and looked up at his wife with a peculiar expression on his face that she didn't notice. In his mind ran several incidents when he had been nearly overcome with jealousy. The worst had been during a visit to Deerwood when he had seen Valancy outside the library talking to a summer visitor. That slimy weasel had been coming up with reasons to touch her. He brushed his hands on her cheeks saying they were "delightfully fair-befitting such a sweet little fairy" before asking her out for tea.

Valancy had loyally replied that she couldn't come as she was a married woman and - that's when he'd put his arm around her and met the other fellow's eyes before saying that they had other plans. He'd left. Valancy was too modest and humble to understand what happened. She had spent some time worrying that they had been rude to a new acquaintance. Barney closed his eyes as he remembered quietly telling her to not talk about him again - and seeing the surprised confusion on her face. How could he explain to her that he wanted to love her right then in their boat to get her mind back on him and remind her which man she loved. He'd been embarrassed about it, acting like he was a passionate, uncontrolled boy of 17 instead of a mellow respectable middle aged man of 35. Still, he'd been nearly silent for the rest of the day and had insisted on coming along with her the next three times she went to the library. He wasn't in love with his wife, but she was his best friend, under his protection. He would take care of her the best way that he knew how. And no one was taking her away from him.

"BARNEY!"

Barney's head jerked up as he paused from washing his hands.

"You're ignoring me again."

"I'm not. I was only-"

"Listen. He dedicated this one. He's never done that before, 'To my wife who has brought a new mystery into my life and who has given me the joy of introducing the woods to my best friend. Thank you for these happy first months.'"

Barney struggled like he never had with his secret. Trying to control his voice, he casually asked, "Aren't dedications supposed to be like six or seven words at most? What does that mean anyway?"

Valancy instantly rose to John Foster's defense. "I think it's wonderful. I imagine that she probably cried she was so happy when she read it. If you could write like him, I would sit for hours next to you, listening to you talk to me."

Barney gave her a rye smile. "Then, I'm glad that I can't. I like things much better as they are."

"What do you mean?"

"Is that what I do when you look up at me smiling, sitting right next to me - talk?"

Valancy blushed deeply while Barney laughed at her. "Where's my supper, lady? You promised me a chicken. I've been thinking about it all the way home."

Valancy set out Barney's chicken dinner and heard all about his trip to the Port. As soon as Barney finished eating, Valancy cleared the table, washed the dishes and stretched out on the rug in front of the fire with her new book. Barney startled her by picking her up, carrying her into their room and tossing her down onto their bed. He stretched out and had her lie down on his chest while he read a newspaper 'not listening' to Valancy's sudden "You have to hear this." as she read his words to him.

Valancy broke into his thoughts, "Why are you smiling like that?"

"Like what? I'm not smiling."

"Yes, you are. Like you know something that I don't."

"I know lots of things that you don't. You really had an abysmal education."

"Barney, stop it. Tell me right now. What particular secret are you keeping from me?"

Barney had promised he'd never lie to her. What could he say? He blurted out the first thing he thought - and immediately regretted it.

"John Combs who works up at The Grand told me that there's going to be a masked ball next week. As he put it, 'T'will be a lot of toffs runnin' round in costumes making fools of theyselves.' It's open to the residents too. You don't have to be rich to be foolish."

Valancy dropped her book and rolled over with shining eyes. She gripped the front of his shirt. Barney grinned delightedly as he got kissed again and again. He held her against himself and rolled her over onto her back.

Valancy held his face in her hands. "Do you mean that we are going? You remembered? I thought you weren't even listening to me really at

the time! Oh, BARNEY! OH, THANK YOU!" She kissed him several more times.

Barney eagerly kissed her back remembering nothing that she had ever said to him about a masquerade, a novel or anything else like it.

Valancy smiled up at him before pushing away from him. "I know that look. You have no idea what I'm talking about and are trying to fake it. When I was reading that novel you said was 'bilge and rot', you know, *Mystery at the Masquerade*, I told you that it had always been a dream of mine to go to a masked ball or costume party. Did you not want to go? I'm happy no matter what we do. I'm sure it will be very expensive too. We can stay home. I already spent extra money this week on cleaning supplies for the windows."

"But, not the Oriole window. You didn't do that one, right? Not the whole thing."

Valancy blushed and shook her head. "It was no trouble. I love to look through it, but it had gotten so dusty. I just—"

"Next time, I will do it. Please don't do it again. I'm not being a tyrant, but I don't want you doing such precarious jobs. You must have had to use that old ladder to get the top of it. You could have fallen right through it. You are always working so hard and doing too much. I want you to know that I am very happy with all you do." A sudden pang of guilt hit him. Yes, his wife did do way too much work for him, for their happiness. Within a few months, her time for happiness would be over. Selfishly, he planned to deny her a life's dream of a few hours at a party. "For that reason, I think you deserve a thank you. If you want to go, we are going to the party. What do you say?"

Valancy appeared delighted. As her arms went around his neck with more thanks, Barney kissed her as she strongly kissed him back. He felt glad that he'd not been denied her, but in a moment, his heart sank. All those Montreal society people who would be at the hotel. He'd know half of them, more than half. If he were, well, it was masked. He'd have to stay masked, and he'd tell Valancy that they would sneak away before the unmasking. How was he going to explain that without it being obvious that he was trying to not be recognized?

"Barney, are you worried about something?"

"Oh, no. I'm trying to be nice. You want to kiss me. So, I'm letting you. Did you want to kiss me more?"

Barney felt her small fingers in his hair, touching him so lovingly. His heart rather melted as he looked into her adoring face. As he held her close to him and kissed her, he decided not to worry about the party, but focused only on his wife.

Two hours later, Barney had his arms around Valancy, cuddled in their blankets. Valancy rested on him again as they went back to talking about the party.

"Don't worry about the cost, Moonlight. I have a bit of money saved for larks. We'll go to the Port tomorrow and order ourselves some

costumes from Montreal. Decide what we should go as."

Barney could see Valancy's mind at work. She smiled broadly. "I know already."

"It's after 9. We should go to sleep. Where do you think you're going? You know I can't sleep unless you're head's on my chest. I've gotten so used to feeling you nestled close to me."

Valancy laughed, lied back down and fell asleep listening to the beat of his heart, his healthy heart. For a fleeting moment, she wondered again how he would feel when she was gone, but pushed it from her mind. Within a few minutes, they both were sleeping.

The next day, Barney and Valancy took their unplanned but necessary trip to the Port for Valancy to place their costume order and to make their reservations for the party while Barney posted some letters.

Valancy met Barney at the theatre as arranged for a movie.

"What's the matter, Moonlight?"

"I didn't do it. We aren't going."

"Why not?"

"Barney, it was too expensive. I, I couldn't."

"And how much was it?"

"Over ten dollars! That's nearly three weeks of housekeeping money, groceries, supplies! I can't do that. Not on a party for one night. That's for the cheapest costume. The ones I wanted were over \$25!"

With great effort, Barney did not smile. "Well, how about making them instead? Can you do it for less than \$25? And maybe use a base dress that you can wear again?"

"Yes! Let's go!"

"Hold on! We're here to see a movie. It's supposedly horrible. You have to be terrified and hide your head in my chest while I hold you. Why else would a fellow take his wife to the theatre?"

"And what if it's funny instead of scary like the last one?"

"That's where being a good wife comes in. You fake it and let me hold you anyway."

After the show and excellent acting, Valancy spent an hour buying the strangest things including a new white shirt and brown pants for Barney at the department store before happily announcing that she was done.

Barney could hear the sounds of Valancy working all the next day. For the two days following, she disappeared to use her second cousin's sewing machine. On day four with two days to spare, she happily announced that the costumes were ready, but still refused to tell him

what they were. That night, he had to hide in the lean-to while she hid them in their room under a blanket. Barney full intended to ignore his wife's demands to "not peek", but she stood in front of him while undressing for bed as she informed him that if he took just one look, he would have to sleep on the couch. Barney thought, "not on your life" while he reached out to her saying, "Why don't you come lie down here with me - just for a minute?" She put her hands on her hips and reiterated, "I mean it. For two weeks. I won't have anything to do with you. Not a kiss, not a hug, not a touch, nothing."

"Moonlight, I have never been less inclined to look at something in my life. Now, come here."

The night of the Mask arrived. Valancy told him that she would get ready while he was working and that he could get ready afterwards. He was to come out of the lean-to at 5.

Barney obeyed and found his hot supper waiting for him on the table. He ate it and read his instructions to wash thoroughly in the bath in front of the fire and put on the white shirt and brown pants. He sat reading while waiting for his wife.

"Ready? I'm coming!"

"Yeah. Ready." Barney kept reading the paper he'd bought at the Port.

"Well?"

Barney glanced up and sat immobile. Valancy was swathed in vibrant colors from around her head to her tiny feet encased in red shoes. She wore many gold bangles around her wrists with a gold something encircling her head. Her strange slanted, mysterious eyes peeked out from the folds around her face which she pushed back as she faced him.

"We are going as an Indian couple. You know, from India."

Barney sat without moving as Valancy kept talking and ran to get him the rest of his simple costume - a head wrap, some cheap beads and decorations, a simple walking stick, and his mask. He held onto his stick and mask almost frozen.

Valancy dropped down onto the couch. "You don't like it? Oh...I thought you would. You've told me so many times about how much you loved India and-"

"I do like it. It's, it's just, Iâ€|. " Barney kept staring at her.

"What's wrong with it? You can tell me."

"No wonder you didn't fit in with the Deerwood crowd. You were born in the wrong land. I never realized how exotic you really are, Moonlight. Those clothes become you like nothing else. Of course. You should have been born in India or China. It suits you perfectly." A slow smile spread on Barney face as he sighed happily. His eyes traveled all over her costume.

Valancy's face began to flush. "Barney! Honestly!"

Barney picked her up and carried her back to their room. He laid her down on their bed and knelt down next to her as she sat up. He caught as she tried to get away and kissed her more and more deeply. As he kissed his favorite spot on her neck, he whispered in between his kisses, "Moonlight, I have never wanted to go to a party less than I want to right now. This was an outstanding idea. Now, I have an idea of my own. It's a great one. Let this Indian man reassure his little wife how much he appreciates all she does with a night at home instead of -"

"We are going to the party! I already told several people we would see them there! How will I explain our not coming?"

Barney grinned. "I'll just ask the husbands if they felt like going. When they say 'No.', I'll say, 'I talked my little lady into staying home. We went to bed early.'"

Valancy shot scarlet. "You will NOT! Don't you dare!"

Barney laughed uproariously as her scandalized face. "Fine. I will take you to the party, but you have to promise that we will leave before the unmasking and celebrate our own party at home. Agreed?"

Valancy blushingly agreed.

After arriving at the party, Barney did his best to stay out of sight. He tried not to talk and was glad that his costume included a headwrap and that Valancy had told him to grow out his facial hair into a small beard and mustache. With the slight streaks of gray, it hid his appearance even more. After dancing with Valancy twice, Barney saw Markston walking up to him. Markston talked directly to him without knowing him and took Valancy to the floor.

Barney found an elderly man who had brought a Montreal newspaper. They sat together and read or had short conversations about politics or finance. He found that this party was really not so bad at all.

"Where is Valancy?" he thought after realizing he hadn't seen her for about 15 minutes. He scanned the room, looking for her. A rush of anger filled him. Eversley. She was talking to Eversley - and he had his arm around her. He could pull that stuff on other fellow's wives if he wanted to, but not Valancy, not his sweet, trusting, totally innocent little girl. Forgetting that his "little girl" was a married woman of 29, Barney said to his companion, "Excuse me. I will be right back."

"Only beat him if you have to." was the sole rejoinder Barney heard as he moved across the room.

Eversley was dancing with Valancy again - holding her much too close. Barney did not like it.

"Ah, there you are, dear. I couldn't see you for a little while. Are you having a good time?" Barney could feel other eyes on him. Several people knew exactly what he was doing - Eversley included.

"Yes, Mr. Eversley invited me to dance and to talk."

"How kind of him. Well, Mr. Eversley, I think that's enough dancing and talking with my wife for now. I'll take her back."

"Oh, no, Mr. Snaith. I am having a delightful time with your exotic lady. Please don't take her away so soon."

"That is a husband's privilege and right - to take his wife away from other men. I claim it now."

Valancy heard the warning sound in Barney's voice. "Thank you for your kind attention and the dances, Mr. Eversley." She let go of his hands and offered them out to Barney. Eversley grabbed her arm and whispered to her. Barney heard, "It's not too late to change your mind." as he jerked Valancy to his other side and quickly, expertly danced her away from Eversley.

Valancy's face was now in abject shock. "Barney! You told me that you could hardly dance. Why did you pretend you couldn't for our dances?"

"I can't lie. I can't lie. I already did about the dancing. I can't make it worse." flashed through his mind. "Well, I thought you'd make me spend all evening on the dance floor. I've been having a great time talking politics with a guy about 80 years old and reading the newspaper while you're busy making every fellow in the room in love with you. Mr. Eversley looks smitten already. Should I be jealous?"

Valancy bit her lip, looked down and turned her head away from him. Her eyebrows contracted worriedly. Just what had Eversley said to her? After a long pause and a silent dance with a tearful wife, Barney held her more tenderly and pulled her closer to him. He softly whispered to her, "Confessions to a husband are a lot easier to make immediately rather than later. What do you have to say to me, Valancy?"

Valancy couldn't meet his eyes.

"Moonlight. Moonlight, please look at me. VALANCY. Eyes up." Valancy's tearful eyes met Barney's tender ones as he smiled as kindly as he could down at her. "Understand me. I know Eversley. Quite well. He didn't recognize me. I want it to stay that way. I know the sort of man he is. There is a reason I came to get you. Now, what did he say to you?"

"Where did you meet him?"

Barney gave her a look. Valancy understood that she was asking what she could not know.

With a quivering voice, Valancy told him that Eversley had asked her to stay the night with him. Barney had expected it, but still felt irate and gripped her more tightly. "And what did you say?"

"I told him that I was married."

"And?"

"He, he, he laughed at me. He said that he didn't care. He, he said - It doesn't matter."

"What? I want you to tell me. Please."

"He, he, he said, that he'd make it up to you and, and he, he" Valancy's voice dropped so low that Barney had to strain to hear her. She also dropped her forehead onto his chest and talked down making it even more difficult, but he prompted her again, reassuring her over and over that he would not be angry with her. "He offered me money."

THAT Barney had_*not*_expected.

Very quietly, Barney whispered, "Tell me exactly what he said."

"Don't worry about it, little China Doll. I'll make it up to him. Give me a night. I'll give him \$150. That would help you out, wouldn't it? I'm sure you could use it. Think of what you could buy for him with so much money. You would be helping both of us. You're a married woman. You understand how I feel. I want you badly. What's one night to him?"

Valancy felt the maniacal rage sweep through him. "Oh, Barney! Please! PLEASE! Let it go! Don't get us thrown out! He's a rich man. Who are we? No one will believe us. Let's just enjoy our last hour together and forget it happened. It's nothing. Just talk. I refused him. We can just-"

"NO." Barney curtly cut her off mid-sentence. He had never been more enraged. Jealousy consumed him. "We are leaving now. We will enjoy the rest of our night at home. Please go down to the boat and wait for me there. Valancy. That's enough. This one time, I am telling you what to do. You will go now." He watched his wife nod, turn, retrieve her coat and walk out of the room.

Eversley was standing with a group of other men. Barney knew several of them. He walked up to the group and got openly mocked with several insults about Valancy thrown in.

Barney pulled off his headpiece. They all stopped talking. He saw immediate recognition on Eversley's astonished face. "It can't be!"

Barney pulled off his mask and heard "Redfern!" right before Eversley's nose broke.

"_*Keep your hands off my wife._ If you don't get the message, you can get it from the Port Lawrence police and my lawyers." In two punches, Eversley was on the ground unconscious. "Anyone else want to offer me \$150 to have a night with my wife?"

Silence.

Before anyone could react, Barney wove past the dancers and disappeared into the crowd. He ran down to the pier, rinsed his bloody hand off in the water, and jumped into his disappearing propellor boat.

While backing out the boat, Barney started whistling. Valancy had been right to want to go. That had been the best party he'd ever attended. After all the harassment and pain he'd endured at Eversley's hands all those years, seeing him flat on his back knocked out, bloodied and with a smashed in nose had been wonderful. Eversley would be disfigured for life. That should end his career as a wife stealer.

As Barney calmed down, he realized Valancy was smiling at him. No, she was beaming adoringly at him.

"What?"

"Thank you, Barney. You take very good care of me."

"Come sit over here."

Barney looked down at Valancy's small head cuddled into his shoulder and felt her softly kiss his neck as he drove. With one hand steering and the other hand around his wife's waist, they had several near misses as he forgot to look where he was going as he was otherwise occupied,

Barney felt immense satisfaction. He'd won a fight. He was headed back to his own house. And he had his sweet, loving wife in his arms, kissing him.

Barney had never been so happy in all his life.

Barney walked out of the post office at the Port reading a letter from his editors. They "were delighted to hear of his marriage", "had been able to include his dedication just in time before the manuscript went to the printers who were rushing it through to be available to booksellers within four weeks pending his approval", "were overjoyed to hear that he had the next book completed six months ahead of schedule", and "hoped his prolific writing would continue, inspired by his new found happiness".

Barney laughed cynically and shook his head, thinking "What you mean is 'Oops. Should we have sent you a present and did we miss the social announcement in the newspaper?', 'We and the printers are dropping everything because we will make lots of money off this.', 'Please, please forgive us, and don't use another publisher.', and 'We are glad that we will be making even more money this year than we thought. We really regret not sending a present more than we can express.'"

Barney laughed as he folded it up and put it into his pocket. This meant a trip into Montreal to approve the printer's proof of Winter Skies, hand over the final of Blue Happiness, and negotiate the terms of his next book, Wild Honey.

They were right about one thing. He was prolific these days. Poor Valancy would have a lot to memorize.

Barney walked over to the station to consult the train schedules. His trips usually lasted about three to four days. He felt bad avoiding seeing Dad, but he just wasn't up to it. How could he explain he was so close and hadn't gotten in touch with him? The thought of his old life made him sick. He wanted to get to Montreal, manage his business

and get out.

Barney walked towards the general store to do the things that Valancy had asked him to. He stopped short. Valancy. What was he thinking? How could he leave her alone for days? Maybe she should go home to her mother's. The thought of her alone and vulnerable. His reputation was usually enough to keep people away, but if someone knew that he was goneâ|. Well, she was no beauty, but the fellows at Chidley Corners had found her attractive enough. Well, for that matter, so did he. Barney gave a short laugh. That was putting it mildly. He was forever after her, felt guilty about it sometimes, but she always seemed to appreciate his affection.

No, her going to Deerwood wasn't a good idea either. That hired hand Jacques whoever always seemed to find an excuse to talk to her. At least, the one time he did when they met him in Deerwood. And he'd known her when she lived at Abel's. Did things for her. Why hadn't she just asked him? He had offered all the time.

Barney uncomfortably wondered who else found his wife attractive. Just because Edward Beck hadn't appealed to her. Beck was ancient, but he wasn't so young either. 35. 6 years older than her.

With her hair cut short and new dresses, she looked even younger than her real age.

The summer visitors were all arriving. Who knew who they were? If they were even safeâ|. There couldn't be a worse time to have to leave her.

What a nuisance this was! What did he pay these people for? Just publish it, print it, sell it! What was so hard? It was their job!

Did he really need four days? No, the negotiations could be handle in two, another day at the printers. He could get it done in three days. No, two days. One at the publishers. One at the printers. That's it.

The shop assistant at the Port grocery store thought that the strange man from the island past Deerwood was like a different person today. He was always smiling, personable, friendly. Today, he was a beast. Probably fighting with his new wife. How long had they been married - a month? Two? Well, that's what he gets. He probably was late for the wedding - and she didn't appreciate his not knowing what she would need in her new house. He deserved it. She smiled smugly at him while saying, "\$3.27, please."

As Barney walked out, he thought about his trips alone into the Port. Why did he do this? Leave her all alone? There was no need. He should bring her along. It'd be a nice change for her. They could always split up and meet up again somewhere. She kept the agreement and never pried.

Was she really safe all alone? What was happening right now?

Barney wanted to get home immediately to make sure that she was all right.

When he got home, Barney didn't whistle for Valancy like he usually

did. He carried his load slowly up the path to his house. He opened the door half-expecting to see Valancy lying murdered on the kitchen floor. She was frosting a small cake instead.

"Barney! I'm so sorry. I didn't hear you call me! No wonder you look so grumpy."

"I'm not grumpy."

"No, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I said I'm not grumpy."

Valancy raised one eyebrow and didn't say anything else. Barney felt more annoyed. That's what she did whenever she thought he was grumpy and didn't want to irritate him more. He wasn't grumpy. He was just annoyed and concerned.

"I'm not grumpy."

Valancy didn't answer.

Barney roughly dropped down the groceries and began to wash his hands. "What's the cake for?"

"I am celebrating."

"Yes, I asked you what for?"

"Our first month being married."

"Oh."

Valancy gave him her mysterious look and smile. "So, I'm very glad you're not grumpy. This wouldn't be a good day for it. Be sure you shave before bed tonight."

"Oh? Oh, okay." Barney felt a little better.

Valancy came over and kissed him. "Or you could shave now." as she walked outside to get the laundry off the line.

Barney smiled sheepishly to himself. "That woman knows me too well." He walked outside and watched her take down the laundry.

"Is that a 'no'? You're not shaving."

"It's a 'I better tell you my news first.'"

"Did you find someone else? Are you leaving me? Wait. This is your house. Am I being kicked out?"

Barney discovered he was grinning broadly. "Hardly. Kick out a passionate woman who has such good ideas like shaving in the middle of the day? No man is that crazy. Besides, who else would have me? No, I have to leave for a few days."

"Where are you going?"

"I can't tell you. I'll be back in two days, but no women involved."

Fair enough?"

"Certainly. I'll be sure to tell the other fellows to stop courting me before you get home." Barney knew that Valancy meant it as a joke, but he felt a sudden flame of intense jealousy. He lifted Valancy off the ground and wildly kissed her. She was gasping and shaking as he crushed her into his chest, telling her that he wished he could take her along and to stay home the whole time he was gone.

"I can't...breathe! Barney! Too tight!"

Barney relaxed his grip and looked down at his wife's shining eyes. Valancy held his face with her little fingers like he loved. "So, that means you are going to shave then?"

Barney threw back his head and laughed. "I'm going now. And maybe I'll bring you back something from my trip."

"I'd love it. I could really use a new rolling pin."

"I was thinking of something from Jacqueline's orâ€|.yes, new rolling pin it is, if that's what you need." Barney casually kept lighting the oil stove. Valancy's face hadn't changed. She must not have caught it. Why didn't he just announce that he was going to Montreal if he was going to say stuff like that?

Two days later, Valancy offered to pack for him, but Barney declined. He took his bags into the lean-to and packed up his 'John Foster' clothes plus had another small bag into which he put his usual clothes to change into on the train back. He saw Valancy silently 'not see' him take down the shoe blacking, his watch that he never used, and a small leather travel case that he'd forgotten were on top of the wardrobe - and should have been in the lean-to. As he looked at her closely, she appeared relieved. He smiled to himself, "She's probably thinking, 'Oh, thank goodness, he's going to look semi-respectable wherever he's going.' Let's see her reaction to this."

"Valancy?"

"Humm?"

"Do you know how to cut hair?"

"Are you going to cut your hair, Barney?"

"Just trim it up a little. Can you do that? Not cut it. Just trim it. I can do it, but usually one side is longer than the other."

"YES! Yes, I can." Valancy carefully trimmed up his hair, looking tremendously happy to be doing it.

Barney approved it. He still didn't look like Bernard Redfern, but he didn't look so ragged either.

"Do you, I mean, are you, I mean?"

"Out with it, Woman."

"Are you bringing a hat? If not, I can cut my groceries to help buy

youâ€|. " Her voice faded away unsure.

"Will it make you feel better to know that I have dug out a perfectly respectable hat to take with me?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

"Well, I haven't, but you can pretend that I did."

"BARNEY! "

The next day, Barney had a very hard time leaving home. He woke with the sun and looked down at the slight figure nestled next to him.

"Two days of sleeping alone. I am not looking forward to it. I went years. Now, I'm struggling over two days." Barney softly kissed his sleeping wife's hair, quickly dressed in his usual Barney clothes, ensured he had all his John Foster clothes and his manuscript before driving away to the Port.

John Foster in his smart suit, shined shoes, pocket watch and brand new, fashionable hat arrived at Voss & Conway at 9:15 on Thursday morning. Eric Voss led him immediately up to the closed office where the negotiations would take place. A small breakfast, tea and coffee were laid out.

Vincent Conway came in a little while later. Simon Dewyer, Mr. Foster's lawyer arrived exactly at 9:30.

The meetings began.

By 4:00, the final contract was completed. Each man has signed it. Hands were shaken all around. John went out the same back way that he had been taken in.

Simon and John dined together at a small French cafe to discuss how it had gone.

"But, John, a 5% increase in your royalties is huge."

"I would rather have had more say in the layouts and covers."

"Yes, I know. That's the artist talking. You write to pay the bills. Enjoy your 5%. Besides, I'm sure it will come in handy if you ever were to settle down, get married."

"I am married."

Simon much too loudly repeated, "YOU'RE MARRIED? TO WHO?"

"Shut up. A month ago. And not a word. The world will know soon. I dedicated my next book to her. I'm eager to see her reaction. She doesn't know, of course."

"Which? Doesn't know what?"

"Anything. To her, I'm a disreputable, probably criminal, tramp living on an island."

"Is this a joke, Foster?"

"Not at all. The funny part is that she asked me to marry her."

"You are joking. Please tell me you are joking. This can't get out."

"Nope. True as day." Barney laughed, hugely enjoying seeing his uptight lawyer's shock and recoiling horror at the thought of it hitting the newspapers that Bernard Redfern's wife was a girl from some unknown place in the Muskoka backwater who thought he was a hobo and was so desperate for a husband that she proposed to him - and that she still had no idea who he was because he'd never gotten around to telling her that he was a multimillionaire.

"Well, then, you are mad. The 5% was the only way to go. If you refuse to touch your family money, you can take better care of her and your children, if the Lord blesses you with them. You can't continue living as you are. She deserves a good life."

Barney felt a surge of pride. "Oh, no. To her, it's the best life. She's so happy you couldn't believe it unless you saw it. I'm not sure what she's more in love with - my island or me. She wouldn't want to live anywhere else. I've never met a girl like her in my life. Valancy is an amazing woman. Happy, thankful, good, kind, funny. She's a treasure."

Simon smiled at him and clapped him on the back. "Well, Red-Foster, I'm truly happy for you. I hope you have a long and happy marriageâ|. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Thanks. It's been great. I'll always remember it."

"You are crazy. You do know that, Foster?"

Barney smiled, paid the bill and retired to his hotel after stopping in at a store along the way. He fell down into his bed and told himself, "Okay, tonight I'm going to sleep. I can't do another day like this. I'm exhausted. You can sleep without Valancy. You did it for years. You're going to have to do it again."

Without wanting to, Barney's mind traveled to the night before he left. Valancy had kissed him with such adoration, clung to him, told him how much she would miss him. Barney moved over to his usual side of the bed. He stretched his arm out, put a pillow on top of it and hugged the pillow. It didn't help. He felt like a fool, but he decided to whisper to the pillow like he did to Valancy as he held her sometimes in the morning when she faced away from him just waking up. He told Pillow Valancy all about his day, the talks, why he was not happy entirely but glad for the extra money and how his books were finally going to be available in Australia and New Zealand through Meriwether Publishing.

Sometime before midnight, he finally fell asleep.

John Foster did not have a good day at the printers. The printer's proof had two pages out of order, a skipped page and no copyright page. Immediately, they set about correcting it while John could hear a fellow getting fired in the next room. He rose from the table, walked in on the discussion and asked why the proof had been so bad.

The poor fellow nearly broke down explaining that his wife was sick, he got very little sleep, and his youngest was only 2 with the 10 year old having to miss school to stay home to try to care for the rest of the little ones who weren't in school in order to help his mother. At night, he had to manage all the household chores as his wife couldn't get out of bed. John told him that he would not lose his job, told him what he wanted changed and asked to leave with him tonight so that he could see what could be done for him at home.

After signing off the perfect proof, John and Anton walked down the street conversing in French, heading towards a poor section of the old city of Montreal. John sent out for his family's doctor with a note "Redfern requires you." while providing the address. He left cash for the doctor, explaining that he was leaving before the doctor arrived. He strictly charged Anton to not tell the doctor who had called for him as he had used "a different name to get him to come". After sending the 10 year old to the grocers with a list of food and money, John told Anton that a maid and a nurse would be coming to help tend the house and watch the children on condition he would promise that those of school age would attend every day without fail unless very ill.

Anton gave his word.

John left immediately. He sent word to Barrage's Employment Agency with his requirements for staff for two months to the Anton's address and pre-paid stating that the family could change staff if found unsuitable.

Finally, he picked up his bags from the hotel and ran to catch his train.

After an uneventful ride and with only four stations left to go, John Foster left his compartment. Barney Snaith returned to it and prepared to disembark in two more stations.

Barney couldn't walk quickly enough through the Port to get to Lady Jane. He'd come back tomorrow with Valancy to get whatever she needed. He was so tired after two nights of almost no sleep. He couldn't wait to fall into his bed, feel his wife's little soft, warm head on his chest and sleep until noon.

After passing through Deerwood, Barney was on the road to his island. As he came up over the rise, he saw what he hadn't expected to see - lights on in his house. Of course, Valancy was there. A strange feeling unlike he'd ever had crept up on him. He realized that he was coming to a real home for the first time in his life. He thought by his age, it wouldn't matter, but somehow it did. As he loaded his bags into the canoe, he thought "All I have been thinking about for the last two days is Valancy. I missed her. I really missed her. I can't wait to see her."

Barney whistled to Valancy who came running down to him. He leaped out of his boat, threw his arms around her and lifted her off the ground. He realized that had been an absolutely horrible, miserable, awful two days. He hated every second of it. He really had - because Valancy wasn't there. "I'll never leave you again." He whispered to her as he held her even tighter.

Valancy tried to tell him that she wanted him to feel free to do whatever he wanted to. Barney teased her that there was no such thing as freedom. She took him seriously, but what he really meant was "I never realized how bound up I am in you, how much your love means to me, and I can't bear the thought that within weeks or months, you will leave me."

Barney kept her held tight as they walked up into the house. He remembered his bags and ran down to get them before locking them into the lean-to after taking out her presents. He happily strolled back into the house.

"Come see your presents."

"Is it a rolling pin?"

"How did you guess?"

Valancy admired her beautiful, solid, straight new rolling pin. She conjectured that the previous one had gotten bent when the wife had need to whack her husband into line with it - and she was glad that she was now equipped to do the same.

"And your second present."

"Barney, you can't give me so much. I was perfectly content with the rolling pin." Valancy unwrapped her second present and laughed. "FIVE boxes of 100 matches!"

"Yes, I don't want to hear again, 'Barney, I can't find the matches. Where did you put them?' every time after I shave. We will scatter them all over the house. Now, I am exhausted. I missed feeling you close to me. I. Could. Not. Sleep."

"Really? Without your snoring, I slept wonderfully." Valancy looked back over her shoulder and smiled at him.

Barney wrapped his arms around her waist, standing behind her. He rested his cheek against hers as he squeezed her tight.

He whispered into her ear. "Did you notice?"

"No, notice what?"

Barney rubbed his cheek up and down against her soft skin. "I shaved on the train."

Valancy's laughter rang out followed by her scream as Barney threw her over his shoulder and carried her into their room.

End
file.